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The Eschatological and Timaeus Myths

by

Gregory Bernard Emerson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Philosophy

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 1996

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Abstract

This thesis explores how one should read the myths of the *Gorgias* (523a-526d), *Phaedo* (107d-115d), Er (*Rep.* 613e-621d) and *Timaeus*. To do so, I have set each myth in its proper context and interpreted them with a view to their rhetorical purpose. I defend the view that the first three, the 'eschatological' myths, should not to be taken literally: they are directed at a somewhat unphilosophical crowd and their primary role is to either act as fictional thought experiments or as incantations to redirect the audience to philosophy. The *Timaeus* myth, on the other hand, should be taken quite literally and while it is intended to be heard by a philosophical audience, it teaches that science and philosophy are inscribed in the cosmos. Though the myths do convey some metaphysical doctrines such as reincarnation, their main function is to get Plato's philosophy into the heads and hearts of his listeners.

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I. Introduction

In the myths of the *Gorgias* (523a-526d), *Phaedo* (107d-115d), Er (*Rep.* 613e-621d) and *Timaeus*, Plato recounts detailed stories about the effect of the soul's discarnate existence on its incarnate life. The principal concern of this thesis is to determine whether these stories embody a doctrine of fate or whether they are speculations which are not meant to be taken literally. Though many of these stories were borrowed from the Pythagoreans and Orphics before him and they have gone on to influence both Stoic notions of fate and the Christian doctrine of immortality, the question facing this essay is: Why did Plato choose to recount *these* stories, and what did *he* mean by them?[1]

Throughout the course of this thesis, perhaps the most challenging and integral problems to be addressed is how literally the myths are to be interpreted. There are four main ways of approaching the myths: (1) one could read them completely literally; (2) one could read them as allegory or metaphor; (3) one could see them as fictional thought experiments; or (4) one could read them as an excerpt which ought to be used as a charm or incantation. Along the first line of interpretation, one could argue that Plato was using these myths to convey truths in which he believed literally, but held with a less degree of certainty than the truths of the dialectic. One would see the myths as advancing hypotheses about the true nature of the world or the soul: interpreting the eschatological myths, for example, as a well founded guess about the nature of life after death. An allegorical or metaphorical interpretation, however, would challenge the reader to examine what the allegory or metaphor *stands for*. Once one has decoded what the story

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[1] Julia Annas (1982), p. 120

symbolizes, then the interpreter would urge that Plato actually wanted the audience to believe this hidden meaning. The third way of approaching the myths is to regard them as "thought experiments" which are not intended to be taken literally nor seen as symbolic allegory or metaphor. Rather, they would be offered for chiefly rhetorical purposes: by the telling of a story, one may see Socrates as trying to get the audience to think about and achieve clarity in a fictitious world and import that newly gained clarity to the 'real' world. For example, learning to solve problems in the imagined afterlife teaches one to address problems in this one. Finally, the fourth option is that Socrates uses these stories as charms, which, when repeated, gives strength.

I will begin my examination of the myths of the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Er* and *Timaeus,* therefore, by taking a broad view of how Plato's myths ought to be read. While scholars have held widely divergent interpretations of the myths, I shall argue that we have very good reason to avoid any dogmatic interpretation of Plato. We must read them as we do the dialectical aspects of Plato's philosophy for we are invited to be participants rather than spectators in the dialogue. Since participants have varying capacities for philosophy and thought, interpretations of the myth may also be varied and not strictly "right" or "wrong". Plato's myths are told to both the philosophical and the unphilosophical so it should come as no surprise that the paternalism of Plato encompasses all of his audience.

Following the discussion of myth in general, I will take up each of the individual myths in turn. I have chosen to treat them separately rather than by a thematic approach because none of the myths can be used interchangeably. Each of the myths (a) represents a different level of Plato's philosophical development,

(b) plays a different dialectical role depending on its context and (c) is told to a very different group of listeners. For example, the *Gorgias* myth is generally thought to be one of Plato's earliest myths, it is found at the end of the dialogue when little attention was being paid by the interlocutors and it is told in a somewhat hostile environment. The *Timaeus* myth, on the other hand, is a later example of Plato's storytelling and encompasses almost the whole of the dialogue. Moreover, it is told to a group of like-minded philosophers who seem to take it quite seriously. We can examine and compare the *Gorgias* and *Timaeus* myths only if we keep them in context and avoid evaluating their passages by the exact same standards.

Generally speaking, I will defend the view that the *Gorgias* myth should be viewed as a kind of thought experiment which attempts to have the audience view the choices of their lives *sub specie aeternitatis*. The *Phaedo* myth, however, is told to philosophical youths who are in need of strength and perseverance in their beliefs in philosophy: hence the myth is used as a kind of charm or incantation. The myth of Er combines these two functions and is therefore used both as a thought experiment and as a charm. Meanwhile, the *Timaeus* is a seriously meant account of the cosmos and should therefore be taken quite literally. In the end, however, all four of these myths are told with one end in mind: to get people to base their lives on the findings of philosophy.

Though the myths contain some serious teachings about the metaphysics of the soul's existence, these lessons are secondary to the fact that these myths are tools of moral suasion and education. I will show that Plato is committed to a theory of reincarnation, though the soul retains nothing of its individual personality.

Furthermore, though the transmigration of souls is briefly mentioned in the *Phaedo* and occupies a more central role in the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, I will demonstrate that the context of the *Phaedo* and *Republic* hint at its not being meant literally while an extension of the argument of the *Timaeus* actually argues against it. In the end, however, I will demonstrate that while the "eschatological" myths are so-called because of their apparent subject matter, they have more to teach about life in the here and now than in the hereafter. Moreover, though the *Timaeus* is meant to be a literal account of the nature of the cosmos, it too has similar moral implications. In all of these myths, Plato uses the notion of the soul as a concrete way of discussing the moral life of people rather than offering a serious account of the non-visible life-force of human beings. These myths are primarily used as pedagogical tools rather than dogmatic decrees: the eschatological myths try to engage and encourage their listeners to follow a philosophical path while the *Timaeus* myth argues that philosophy is the ultimate *telos* of the cosmos and human nature. The strength and key to Plato's myths is derived from his commitment to *praxis*; if one's life is faithful to truth, if one is led by the daemon called philosophy, then one's destiny will be a good one and one shall be happy and immortal come what may.

II. Plato's Use of Myth

Any study of Plato's myths has to come to terms with two divergent aspects of these "stories": (1) Plato variously testifies to their veracity[1] while he also (2) recognizes myth's potential to persuade and influence the passions[2]. If there is any agreement among the commentators on Plato's myths it is this; Plato intends his own myths both to be "true" in some sense and to be morally responsible. The "truth" and "moral justification" in question have been interpreted in as many different ways as there are commentators, however.

Some commentators strive to prove that certain truths are contained in the Platonic myths and need to be teased out[3]. Other commentators choose to focus their attention on the rhetorical impact of his myths[4]. Still a third group is scattered between the two, more "extreme" camps[5]; thus, no generally accepted view of the meaning or use of myth in Plato's writings has emerged. In looking to these myths for some indication of a doctrine of fate, I must be careful to interpret

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[1] He calls the "likely" in *Tim*. 29d, 59c, 68d; "seriously meant" in *Gorg*. 527ab; *Rep*. 621bc; *Phaedo* 114d; *Laws* 654b; "true and a logos" in *Gorg*. 523a, 524ab 526d, 527ab.

[2] *Rep*. 401cff; the censorship of poetry is sanctioned in *Laws* 765ff; storytelling is not suitable for children in *Rep* 377ac, 522a; *Tim* 23b; *Laws* 841c, 887d; *Cratylus* 408c; *Philebus* 14a, *Hippias Major* 286a *Sophist* 242c; *Politicus* 268e, 304cd.

[3] eg. J.N. Findlay (1980), J.A. Stewart (1960), M.J. Gregory (1968), and others.

[4] eg. L. Edelstein (1947), R. Wright (1979), W. Kaufmann (1959).

[5] eg. Julius A. Elias (1984), Julia Annas (1982), Janet E. Smith (1986), Janet E. Smith (1985), Paul Friedlander (1958), and many more.

each myth on its own merits, yet also keep in mind that the myths should be evaluated on some sort of equal grounds. Otherwise, the temptation may arise to write some aspect of a myth off as a rhetorical flourish, while taking a rhetorical element too seriously. The theory which I shall defend in the following pages centers around the notion of Plato as the philosophical midwife (*Theat.*, 148e-151e) who never wrote a treatise of his own (*Letter VII*, 341c). Any dogmatic interpretation of Plato's myths which argues that he intended them to be used this way or he meant that particular doctrine, ignores the fundamental teaching of Socrates; he taught others to be philosophical and to love and pursue knowledge for themselves. The strength of Plato's myths is that they encourage a philosophical approach to life's choices and their major role is to either introduce people to philosophy or strengthen their faith in it. Above anything else when reading his myths, we must remember this; Socrates spoke with others, and his concern lay squarely with what his interlocutors and audience were to take from their conversations with him.

In the very fact that the commentators cannot agree on what Plato intended in his myths lies the most important lesson; the myths are intended to engage the audience so that some people may take an entirely different teaching than the others. We must recognize that Plato was aware of the varied capacities of his listeners and the myths contain something for each one of them. The myths are to be used as "persuasive" instruments and charms, while they are also "true" in some sense; they are "morally acceptable" while challenging some people to examine their norms. I intend that this chapter establish the border around the puzzle of Plato's use of myth, to be filled in with pieces as they become available in

the next chapters. In general, however, I will defend the view that these myths are primarily concerned with introducing and strengthening people's conviction in philosophy. The *Gorgias* and *Republic* myths, for example, serve to introduce non-philosophical people to the power and need for philosophy. Socrates tells these "stories" to help his listeners begin to see that story-telling will not lead one ultimately to happiness, self-sufficiency and virtue while philosophy will. The *Phaedo* myth, however, is directed at those who are beginning to become philosophical and the story is to be used as a kind of incantation to strengthen one's resolve in it. Finally, since the *Timaeus* represents a discussion of like-minded philosophers (29a), he uses that story to convey more metaphysical truths. Thus, as we will see through the course of this thesis, Plato uses his myths in a number of different ways depending on the context. Plato does not have any one master theory of myth, but rather employs them in a pragmatic approach to getting philosophy into the heads and hearts of his listeners.

To begin to set the border, therefore, it must be emphasized that in Plato's philosophy, the terms "mythos" and "logos" are used in a variety of situations and with many meanings though they both stem from the same root, meaning "to speak"[6]. "Mythos" designated "...a kind of interior language, one which expresses one's thought or opinion. Later it came to mean a story or tale and eventually could be used to mean something false, or a lie"[7]. "Logos," on the other hand,

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[6] J.A.K. Thomson (1935) p. 17. Quoted in Smith (1985), p. 24.

[7] H. Fournier (1946) pp. 215-216. Quoted in Smith (1985), p. 25.

came to be more associated with rationality, calculation, evaluation and computation[8]. It should be noted that Plato uses "mythos" and its cognates about one hundred and forty times, so it should come as no surprise that it have several different senses[9]. Robert Zaslavsky also recognizes the ambiguity surrounding the terms, and prefers to define them loosely. Zaslavsky likens *logos* to a kind of "reckoning" concerned with the here and now, while *mythos* is more akin to a story about the there and then, offering to recount one's motives in a given circumstance[10]. Most commentators seem to agree, however, that there is no key to understand what precisely is meant when Plato uses the terms "mythos" and "logos" for the words sometimes appear to be used as opposites of each other (Gorg. 523a) and at other times they seem to be used interchangeably (Gorg. 527a). Any attempt to pin Plato down to one definition or another is both futile and misguided because "mythos" and "logos" have a familial sort of relationship and were not as opposed in their meanings in Plato's time as they are in our modern context.

From this ambiguity about the definitions of "mythos" and "logos" flows one of the major discussions of Platonic scholarship; which parts of Plato's dialogues should we interpret as a myth or story, and which can be taken as a strict rational account? Depending on the criteria one chooses, the answer to this question can be quite varied. For example, Perceval Frutiger classifies those sections of Plato's

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[8] Smith (1985), p. 25

[9] Smith (1985), p. 25

[10] Zaslavsky (1981), p. 12

philosophy which employ, "Symbolism, the liberty of exposition and a prudent imprecision keeping it voluntarily short of a frank affirmation of truth"[11] as mythical. This criterion leads Frutiger to conclude that such passages as the condemnation of suicide (*Phaedo* 61c-62c), the doctrine of recollection (*Men.* 80d-86c, *Phaedo* 72e-77a) and the story of the afterlife (*Gorg.* 522e-527e) and more are mythical. J.A. Stewart, however, argues that any of the writings of Plato which inspire a kind of "...transcendental feeling which is experienced as a solemn sense of the overshadowing presence of 'That which was, and is, and ever shall be'"[12] should be classified as mythical. By this definition, Stewart concludes that a great deal of Plato's writings are made up of myth, including those itemized by Frutiger, as well as the speeches by Aristophanes and Diotima and the Atlantis Myth (*Tim.* 21a-25d). Zaslavsky employs perhaps the most common sense approach to defining which are the myths by allowing only those that Plato (Socrates) himself *calls* a myth to be myth. This criterion has serious ramifications, for the *Gorgias* story (522e-527e) is called a *logos* explicitly by Socrates (523a), while not all of the *Phaedo* story of the afterlife is called a myth and therefore neither are to be accepted as wholly mythical. The lesson I hinted at in the beginning comes back to be a valuable pedagogical tool; each member of the audience takes with himself their own ideas as to what a myth is. Whether one's name is Frutiger or Stewart, Callicles or Simmias, one will interpret what Plato says in his own way. Thus, perhaps we should avoid asking the Socratic question,

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[11] Perceval Frutiger (1930), p. 36

[12] Stewart (1960), p. 58

"What is Plato's definition of myth?" and realize that it may have as many answers as there are audience members. Just as Plato's dialogues take place in the Heracleitean world of becoming, so, too, will the answer be always changing. Thus, let us look to these stories with a degree of caution, noting that they may teach different things to different people.

An indication that Plato recognized the diversity which was involved in interpreting his myths can be found in what Frutiger calls, "that tone of uncertainty that is peculiar to the myths"[13]. Plato was careful not to be dogmatic about the details in most of the myths, arguing, for example;

> ...I do not think it requires the skill of Glaucus to tell you what they are [the details about the cosmogony of the earth], but to prove them true requires more than that skill, and I should perhaps not be able to do so. Also, even if I had the knowledge, my remaining time would not be long enough to tell the tale. However, nothing prevents my telling you what I am convinced is the shape of the earth and what its regions are (*Phaedo*, 108d).

There are several key elements in this short passage. First, he draws a distinction between being able to *tell* Simmias what the details are, and *proving* that they are in fact that way. Thus, what he is providing is a description of the details of this cosmogony, not a proof that it *must* be so, or cannot be otherwise. Moreover, one must remember that if this is a description of the visible world, then on a Platonic account of epistemology, this account can at best be true opinion rather than knowledge. It has not been arrived at "dialectically," and is therefore not as certain as knowledge of the Forms. The second pertinent fact follows from this

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[13] Frutiger (1930), p. 30, n. 2

preceding consideration, namely, Socrates' doubt whether he has the *skill* to accomplish the task. This statement may lead the reader to ask the question, "If Socrates does not have the skill to do so, then who does?" The answer may be that since the most skilful midwife of ideas cannot prove that this cosmogony is true, then it must be impossible to do so; again, suggesting that only true opinion is possible. Third, he suggests that practical considerations would restrain him from giving the required account; namely, even if he had the knowledge, he does not have enough time. Bearing in mind that it is his own execution which would prevent him from proving what the true earth is like after death, this comment takes on further significance for even a man who is moments away from death does not *know* what awaits him. He can only have faith that that which he *believes* about the afterlife is true. Fourth, Socrates tells Simmias that nothing *prevents* him from sharing what he is convinced of. Socrates could mean that the courts of Athens cannot stop him from disseminating his beliefs because they have already condemned him to death. But viewed in the context of his warnings to the poets, namely, what they write must be true and morally responsible, perhaps it is these conditions which are not violated and hence he is not prevented from telling his tale. In the context of what the poets must do, none of the rules he has established in the prior, (dramatically at least) *Republic* discussion prevent him from saying what he believes. Finally, Socrates urges that he is telling what he is *convinced* of, rather than what he knows[14]. Taken together, this excerpt is perhaps the

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[14] "Forms of 'convince' and 'conviction' occur, in fact, more than fifty times in the *Phaedo*, notably in the following passages: 69e3-70b2, 73b3-10, 77a6-11, 77e3-7, 88c1-d8, 89d4-8, 107a2-b6." In Kenneth Dorter (1970), p. 574, n. 8

epitome of the warnings that surround the Platonic myths; they are not advanced dogmatically but as, at best, well thought out hypotheses. Whether the hypothesis, for example, about the nature of the true earth, is to be taken literally depends on the context in which it is told. Some of the stories are meant to be taken as allegories, others to be used as charms and still others are to be treated with a strict philosophical investigation.

The tentative nature of the *Phaedo* myth is echoed in the other "mythical" stories. Elsewhere, he calls them "likely" (*Tim.* 29d, 59c, 68d), and urges that much persuasion is necessary to make them believable (*Rep.* 414c). In several places, Plato allows that the story can be changed if a better one is more suited (*Gorg.* 524b, 526d, 527c; *Rep.* 621b; *Phaedo* 114d). In this air of uncertainty and repeated reference to conviction and belief, Plato forwards "hypothetically, not dogmatically, no matter what some critics say"[15] stories about the after or pre-existence of the soul, the world of the forms, or the nature of the cosmos. It is to be expected, therefore, that these stories be taken in a variety of ways and suggests that Plato intended them to be the subject of much debate. It has been argued[16] that the reason why he does not forward them dogmatically is that incarnate humans are not in an appropriate epistemological position to understand the true nature of the immortality of the soul. Though this may be partially true, it cannot be forgotten that Socratic philosophy thrives on dialogue, and the very uncertainty of the myths prompts further investigation. After having told

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[15] Elias (1984), p. 126

[16] See Elias (1984), for example

Callicles the story about the afterlife, Socrates urges that they practice virtue,

> And then, when we have practised it together this way, then finally, if you think we ought to, we'll undertake political business, or we'll deliberate about whatever we think fit - we'll be better at deliberating than we are now. For it's shameful for people in the condition we seem to be in now to swagger as though we were something, when we never think the same about the same questions, and when these are the greatest questions - that is how uneducated we are (*Gorg*. 527de).

Thus, those who practice virtue can deliberate about these questions. It is no coincidence that after the myth, Socrates urges further discussion. For by the very tone in which it is advanced, it invites more questions to be considered.

A cautionary note must be inserted at this juncture, for in the *Gorgias* passage cited above, Socrates urges that only *after* one knows and practices virtue can one practice political business or deliberate about the most important questions. I suggest that this hesitation in allowing the ignorant man to deliberate is an example of the fact that the role of myth is different for the philosophic and unphilosophic man[17]. For the unphilosophical man, who is uninterested, incapable or too lazy to pursue knowledge, myths make up the whole of his education and they must therefore accord with the truth (*Rep*. 379aff), sooth the emotions and control the passions (*Rep*. 401cff). The unphilosophical man is discouraged, and even prohibited (*Laws*) from questioning the myths, for

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[17] Smith (1986), p. 20. For the following discussion of the difference between the philosophic and non-philosophic man, I will be drawing heavily from Janet Smith's article.

questioning them may foster rebellion in the state (*Rep.* 537d-538c)[18]. Only those who are philosophical should question them, for myth introduces truths which can later receive a dialectical examination (*Laws* 887c) that serves to chain down ideas (*Rep.* 412e). Hence the myths can present truths that are believed or they can be used as charms which are not concerned with literal truth. They engage the audience, regardless of their education, and make participants of them. For example, the myths of the *Gorgias* and Er encourage their listeners to make choices in their lives based on the outcome of a philosophical investigation; they urge that these unphilosophical people strive to surmount their ignorance as much as possible. The myths strike a balance somewhere between a dogmatic lecture and being completely open to interpretation, encompassing neither extreme. They do speak some truths and they can be questioned though they cannot be completely dismissed. They are not, strictly speaking, lies[19], but the truth they contain is different for different people. Since there is no key to interpretation, we must wait until the individual myths are discussed before we can judge how literally each one should be taken.

Not only is Plato concerned with making participants of the audience, but he is also concerned about the impact that these myths will have on the moral lives of the audience. From the outlines of theology that Plato offers (*Rep.* 379cff), it is quite evident that he seeks to tell the truth about moral matters in his myths. The

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[18] Smith (1986), p. 24

[19] "...there is only one lie in Plato, the rigging of the marriage lotteries..." Elias (1984), p. 219.

following list comprises most of the actions or behaviours that are prohibited from being in the myths of the ideal city[20]:

strife (among gods and elsewhere)	397eff
violation of oaths	379e
causing evil	380a
manyness	380d
lying	382a
fear of death	386b
crying and lamenting	388a
laughing	388e
disobedience	389d
excess	389e
desiring gifts and money	390d
womanliness	395d
insulting, making fun of one another	305e
gifted wisdom	397e
'wailing' musical modes	398e
panharmonic instruments	399c
rhymes encouraging licentiousness	400b

Freydberg argues that since this list is so vast and sweeping, "Spiritedness in general would be banned"[21]. Moreover, he argues that the practical impossibility of suppressing the tales that had been told for a long time ought to signal that Socrates' suggestion that the poets be censored and banned is intended as provisional and ironic[22]. Not only is this interpretation of the outlines of theology passage in the minority, it does not seem to coincide with Socrates' insistence in

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[20] This list found in Bernard D. Freydberg (1993), p. 607-608.

[21] Freydberg (1993), p. 608

[22] *ibid.*

the mythical passages on their truth and being worthy of putting one's faith into them. Socrates takes the myths quite seriously, he realizes the power that music and harmony can have over the soul and he strives to point out, as I have already mentioned, that his stories are 'likely,' 'seriously meant,' 'true' or 'true and a logos.' Interpreting this passage from the *Republic* fairly literally seems to do the most justice to the other passages about myth. Furthermore, it describes what must be the key to any story; it must teach about and help to attain moral virtue and truth. He does not insist on any detail or description about a god or event, rather, he repeatedly urges that various moral lessons be learned. In the outlines of theology passage, it is certain immoral behaviours and attitudes that are prohibited, not 'historical' accounts or descriptions about the world.

It has been suggested[23], and quite rightly I believe, that part of the truth which Plato attempts to promote in poetry is paradigmatic or normative rather than factual truth. It is quite evident that Socrates is not committed to always conveying factual truth, for he is willing to conceal the fact that the marriage lotteries have been rigged, while he also asserts;

> And Cronos' deeds and his sufferings at the hands of his son, *not even if they were true* would I suppose they should so easily be told to thoughtless young things; best would be to keep quiet, but if there were some necessity to tell, as few as possible ought to hear them as unspeakable secrets... (*Rep.* 378a, Emphasis is mine)

Thus, Socrates admits that some factual descriptions, *even if they were true*, ought to be concealed. Moreover, he also allows that the fables which are told to children

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[23] See M. Pabst Battin (1977) pp. 163-174. Ilham Dilman (1979).

are, as a whole, false (*Rep.* 377a). Conversely, the myth of the metals is known to be factually false, but since it describes how the community *ought* to be organized for the most just society, it should be told[24]. It ought to be noted that the poets at the time of Plato enjoyed a significant amount of influence in the society; not only were they entertainers of some sort, but the poems were sources of moral and technical education. The job of the poet, therefore, was taken very seriously. The truth that is sought in poetry is far more than literal; on Plato's account, to be a True poem it must approximate to the Ideal or Form of Poem. Such poetry would not necessarily be concerned with petty details about description and accuracy, but about the Good and Being. In his condemnation of the poets in Book X of the *Republic*, he accuses poets of being like the painters who imitate appearances rather than symbolize forms. As we will see in more detail in the chapter on the myth of Er, Plato condemns the poetry of the day for being three times removed from true Reality. His poetry, however, strives to be a symbol of Reality itself. Since that Reality is Goodness, Justice and Virtue, then his rhetoric must reflect those primarily moral characteristics.

Poetry does not *only* convey a paradigmatic truth about moral matters, however. Socrates is equally aware of the strength and conviction that one can receive from reading and repeating poetry to oneself[25].

...that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their

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[24] Battin (1977), p. 169

[25] For the idea that myth gives man moral courage, I am grateful to Edelstein (1949), cf. p. 474

> dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself *as if it were an incantation*, which is why I have been prolonging my tale (*Phaedo* 114d, Emphasis is mine).

This notion of myth as a kind of moral elixir is echoed in several other passages. Socrates argues that believing in the myths will save man (*Rep.* 621bc) and if he believes that the gods are not indifferent to his struggle to be virtuous, he will gain courage (*Phaedo* 114d), share in virtue and wisdom (*Phaedo* 114c) and endure moral contests on earth (*Gorg.* 526e). Socrates recognizes that those who are intellectually weak will, "...change their opinions either because they are charmed by pleasure or terrified by some fear" (*Rep.* 413c), thus something is needed to keep them convinced of the true moral path. For those that are not of the guardian class, it is the poetry itself which will not only teach them virtue, but give them the strength to persevere.

As we turn to the individual myths, therefore, we must bear in mind the multifarious aspects of these stories. In some lights, we can view them as Platonic responses to the epic and tragic myths that made up the education of the citizens. While the old stories emphasized the lamenting, mourning and ill fortune that befell men (Rep. 604d-606a), his new mythology was entirely more "philosophical." It combatted these stories with new ones which emphasized resolve in the power of philosophy and strength in moral conviction. As we shall see, Plato's myths were not told merely to keep people at a level of ignorance, but to attempt to effect a return to philosophy. They are morally responsible; for they promote the notion of self-sufficiency through the aid of philosophy. They are True because they are self-consistent and are open to dialectical examination when one has reached the

right level of education. Above all, these myths are not old wives' tales (Gorg. 527a); rather, they are fine accounts (523a) which may introduce, encourage or give strength to anyone regardless of education to follow the findings of philosophy. Thus, the myths can both attempt to find some of the same kinds of truths as does philosophy, or they can give the audience faith in the process of philosophy itself. By involving the audience, these stories effect a return to philosophy so that they may overcome their dependency on uncontrolled emotion and begin to see the world through the strength of a philosophical light.

III. The Gorgias

The *Gorgias* myth is the least characteristic of the "eschatological" myths and as such centers entirely on moral rather than metaphysical lessons. Though the myth itself describes the judgment process which occurs behind the veil of death, I submit that it was mainly told to teach and enable people to act morally in this life. As we will see, it is unlike the other "eschatological" and *Timaeus* myths because it lacks any mention of reincarnation, transmigration of souls, cosmology and hence any notion that the afterlife affects the incarnate life. I shall demonstrate that the main reason for this difference is that the myth both springs from and is about the clashes of lifestyle and education between a philosophical and a non-philosophical man and it is not concerned with teaching about a system of divine justice. This myth attempts to provide a pedagogical tool for someone, regardless of education, to discern what is truly good from what merely appears to be. The *Gorgias* myth is a story, not an allegory or an incantation, which is told to shed light on the listener's life. It teaches humans to regard choices *sub specie aeternitatis* rather than from the distorting view of humans as incarnate while the full impact of the meaning of this myth depends on the willingness of an audience member to trust and believe in the teaching of Plato. Some participants of the dialogue, like the main interlocutor Callicles, will remain unaffected. Others, like the audience/participants, may begin to view the world through the eyes of a philosopher and begin to judge their own lives with an eye to the eternal. Hence, this myth exemplifies that, "Reference to the soul is thus a means of talking about

a moral reality that is hidden or disguised by many aspects of our lives"[1].

To demonstrate that the *Gorgias* myth is in fact an attempt to have the unphilosophical view the world by a philosophical light, I will begin by explaining why we can interpret this myth as the result of a clash of ways of living. The explicit and surface debate concerning the *Gorgias* centers around Socrates' contention that it is better to suffer a wrong than to commit one. By the midpoint of the dialogue, Socrates has trapped the two sophists, Gorgias and Polus, in internal contradictions about whether virtue can be taught and what the role of the teacher should be. Then, a young politician by the name of Callicles jumps into the discussion; for he is upset that Socrates has "tricked" Gorgias and Polus into contradicting themselves. Callicles argues that Socrates has been equivocating on the use of terms, and in a Thrasymachean outburst, asserts that it is surely better to be a powerful man and commit a wrong than be the subject of misery at the hands of others. According to Callicles, the strongest have a right to rule while equality is the recourse of the weak (Gorg. 484c). The dialogue reaches its core issue when Callicles attacks the pursuit of philosophy as unmanly (485bd) and entirely inadequate for success in this world. Essentially, the discussion between Callicles and Socrates revolves around the definition of what should be most important in life. Callicles argues:

> For even if someone has an altogether good nature, but philosophizes beyond the right age, he is bound to end up inexperienced in all these things in which anyone who is to be a fine and good and respected man ought to have experience. For indeed they turn out to be inexperienced in the laws (nomos) of the city, and in the speech they should use in

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[1] Dilman (1979), p. 180

> meeting men in public and private transactions, and in human pleasures and desires; and altogether they turn out entirely ignorant of the ways of men (484d).

Callicles sets out, in this his opening speech to Socrates, that "human pleasures and desires" are more important than the philosopher's values in his choice of life. The discussion between these two is not only about the specific moral lesson of whether it is better to suffer a wrong than to commit one, but it also concerns the very life one chooses to live. Callicles and Socrates differ on the very definitions of "what is fine and good," where the former focuses on what concerns the laws of the city and "the ways of men" while the latter focuses on the immutable laws of knowledge. As I will demonstrate, the main purpose of the myth is to provide a way for Callicles to break from his habitual way of looking at the world; it is an attempt to teach him how to discern what is truly important from what is base and distracting.

It is not long after Callicles initial statement that the dialogue degenerates into a kind of monologue by Socrates (505cff). It seems that the differences between the values of Socrates and Callicles are so great that a meaningful exchange is impossible. In fact, Callicles admits that he is only interested in bringing the discussion to a close as soon as possible[2]. Socrates' standard method of elenchus is not able to penetrate the different value schemes that are at play, while Callicles is somewhat unwilling to participate honestly. Eventually (522cff), however, Socrates returns the discussion to the charge that the study of philosophy is unmanly and

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[2] *Callicles*: And couldn't you finish the discussion yourself? Say it all in your own person, or answer your own questions (505d).

will result in its students being filled with fear. Philosophers, the Socratic line of argument goes, derive their strength and do not cower in "womanly" fear because they have a very different way of viewing the world. While non-philosophers think that this world represents the ultimate end and that fears in this world are most important, the philosopher knows otherwise. Where Callicles judges events around him through the eyes of an incarnate man living in an incarnate world, the philosopher is only concerned with that which is important to the spiritual. The myth represents an attempt by Socrates to have Callicles see the world by this philosophical light.

Socrates introduces and peppers the myth with several explicit references to how he views it as an account (logos), while Callicles may view it only as an old wife's tale, something spoken out loud (527a, 523a). Since Zaslavsky takes only those excerpts Socrates calls a myth to be counted as a myth, he takes this story as an account. My response to this classification would be threefold; (1) it does not affect my thesis if one calls this excerpt a "story" or "description" rather than a myth and (2) the reason why he calls it a logos is so that Callicles will not reject it out of hand[3]. It is obvious that Callicles does not respect stories or old wife's tales which he may regard as false, so Socrates avoids the use of the term "myth" to avert an outright rejection by Callicles. Though it may be argued that Socrates has already lost the attention of Callicles by the time the myth is told, still he tries to get Callicles' attention by calling it a logos. One of the most important lessons flows from the fact that Callicles may not be listening; this story helps some to look

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[3] See Smith (1985), p. 26

at questions of morality in a new way, but does not harm those who are not at that level of intellectual maturity. By talking about the "soul" rather than a specific moral doctrine, it may inspire or persuade someone who is philosophical, it may give strength to someone who is not, or it may simply be a tale, something that is spoken without serious consequences. And finally, (3), saying that Callicles and Socrates will call the same excerpt by different names emphasizes the fact that the two participants are on vastly different levels. Where Socrates will find information for further philosophical argument, Callicles will only find a tale. There is no evidence at the end of the dialogue that Callicles has been convinced by the argument or the myth, thus at worst, the unphilosophical man will be unaffected by a Socratic myth. Socrates, on the other hand, puts his belief in the myth, is able to find teaching, "And I will try to be really the best that is in my power in life and, whenever I die, in death" (526d). The fact that these two people view the same excerpt with vastly different degrees of merit is a testament to the difference between a philosophical and non-philosophical life.

Socrates tells a myth that centers around judgment at the time of death; during the time of Cronos, and early into Zeus' reign, men were judged on the last day of their lives, by judges who were still living. They were judged while they still had a body and the judges could tell if they were of fine birth or had riches. Witnesses and friends could testify to the moral character of the person, while the judge himself had, "...clothes on, obstructed by eyes and ears and their whole body in front of their soul. All these things, then, are in their way, both their own coverings and the defendants" (523d). As a result, undeserving men were arriving at both the Isles of the Blessed and at the place of retribution and punishment,

Tartarus.

Since injustice was being done, Zeus decreed changes; first, he enlisted Prometheus' help to conceal the day of death from people's minds. Then, he decided that both the judges and the judged would be stripped of all things including their bodies; judgment would only occur when the person was dead, and no riches, kin or friends could be called upon to testify on their behalf. The judgment would be conducted at the meadow where the road from earth comes, and two roads branch out; the judge would look with his soul itself on the soul of the defendant and send those who are to be punished down a road to Tartarus while those who will be rewarded, on a road to the Isles of the Blessed. Because there remained no impediments to being judged, each sentence became completely just.

At this point, Socrates interrupts his narration and comments:

> And from these accounts (logos) I infer (logizomai) that something like this follows: - Death, it seems to me, is in fact nothing other than the separation of two things, the soul and the body, from each other. When they are separated, then, from each other, each of them keeps not much less its own condition which it had when the man was alive (524b).

For example, if the body was fat, had long hair or was scarred in life, then it would remain so in death. So, too, with the soul; it may be scarred, "...from false oaths and injustice - all that each of his actions stained into the soul..." (525a). Socrates concludes his myth by describing the division of the souls into the incurably wicked, the curably wicked and the virtuous. Of the first group, he cites, "...tyrants, kings, dynasts [like] Tantalus, Sisyphus and Tityus..."(525d) who, since they cannot be reformed, are made examples of. Those who are curably wicked see

these examples, and also undergo pain and suffering but are eventually cleansed.

> But sometimes he noticed another soul that had lived piously and with truth, of a private man or of someone else; but most of all, so I say, Callicles, of some philosopher who did his own work and was no meddler during his life; then he admired this and sent him off to the Isles of the Blessed (526bc).

With this, Socrates concluded his myth, telling Callicles, "...I am persuaded by these accounts, and I consider how to present my soul as healthy as possible before the judge" (526d).

It should be noted that considerable space is devoted to the denigration of tyrants and political leaders; more of them are named in this myth than any other. Those leaders that go astray are grouped in the incurable class of the wretched and made examples to others. This focus is reminiscent of the general tone of the *Gorgias* when discussing the political elite. There are at least two explanations for this phenomena, one external and one internal to the dialogue. The external reason[4] is that this dialogue was written after Socrates' death, when a sophist by the name of Polycrates produced a pamphlet defaming Socrates. This inflamed Plato's anger, so he wrote the dialogue to demonstrate the incompetence of sophists and suggest that an unjust earthly judgment will be corrected by true judges. The myth also suggests that at one time, even gods as judges made mistakes, so it is not remarkable that the earthly judges made a mistake in condemning Socrates. Moreover, seen from inside the dialogue itself, it should be noted that Callicles was himself a politician. Perhaps Socrates thought that the emphasis on the tyrants

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[4] William Chase Greene (1944), p. 259

would serve as a kind of mythical wake-up call to Callicles, making him aware of the consequences that an unjust political life may entail. In opposition to the political life, Socrates ends his myth by describing the benefits of a philosophical one. Thus, while Callicles began his section of the dialogue by berating the choice of a philosophical life as childish, Socrates ends it by showing the rewards of being a philosopher. Whether the rewards in question were intended to be taken literally or not is yet to be solved, but suffice it to say that the myth brings the discussion around to its central issue; the life of a philosopher versus one dedicated to the laws of the city.

The most important element that is present in this myth is that it concentrates almost exclusively on the process of judgment. Both the *Phaedo* myth and the myth of Er have considerable sections devoted to cosmologies, while the *Gorgias* has only a short reference to the meadow where the judgment occurs. Plato does not seem concerned with fitting the court into a proper schema, but rather emphasizes what goes on at that place. Moreover, Socrates' interruption in the narration seems to be a focal point of the myth; in his passage about death being the separation of body and soul, he provides a framework on which to hang a key lesson. Whatever care you take of your body cannot compare to the importance placed on the soul; you can be the subject of a wrong done to your body, but so long as you keep your soul healthy, you will be rewarded. While Callicles would judge a thing's importance by the role it plays in bringing one happiness in this life, Socrates urges that this life is not the ultimate judge. One must live one's life now by the immutable laws of Justice, not by pandering to the laws of this world. Socrates seems to be saying that when deciding how to live one's life, judge it *as*

though one were an eternal judge, for only then can one be guaranteed that the decision will be correct. I interpret this myth, therefore, as a kind of thought experiment to help those who are consumed with worldly concerns to escape their shackles. It says to its listeners, "Imagine that you are to be judged by gods who are not concerned with the ways of the world, and base your life on what these judges would decide." Hence, this myth is more about judgment in this world than about some ethereal law court; it teaches its listeners to look at the world through the eyes of the eternal rather than from the standpoint of the temporal.

There has been a considerable range of comment concerning the interpretation of this myth, and I will briefly discuss two; Julia Annas and Charles Daniels[5]. Julia Annas draws three key lessons from this concluding myth: (1) a message to be optimistic, for even though the good are sometimes punished and the evil rewarded in this life, ultimately everyone will get what they deserve[6], (2) it gives a consequentialist reason to be just[7] and (3) it demonstrates that a worldly end is not the real end[8]. Daniels, in looking to this interpretation, has the following comment:

> Now if evil doers really do get away with it to some degree, and an afterlife is necessary for justice to prevail, then the governing idea

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[5] See, for example, Annas (1982), and Charles B. Daniels (1992), pp. 271-279.

[6] Annas (1982), p. 123

[7] Annas (1982), p. 125

[8] Annas (1982), p. 124

> seems to be that (a) human beings should pander to, please and flatter the gods in this life in order to gain immediate gratification and pleasure and avoid suffering frustration, pain and torments in the next, and (b) justice consists not in curing or preventing evil but in retribution for not having lived the kind of life the gods want.[9]

Daniels prefers to take the myth quite figuratively, and reads it as a kind of scare tactic to make Gorgias, Polus and Callicles reconsider committing any of the most heinous of crimes.

It seems to me that Annas' interpretation of the myth does not give Plato enough credit as an educator. I have attempted to show in the previous chapter that part of Plato's method of doing philosophy is to engage and make participants of the audience. Plato's method could perhaps be summarized by the following popular dictum; "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime." Annas seems to be giving Plato credit only for giving a man a fish for she argues that the main concern of the myth is to convey some truths about the afterlife. She does not credit him with teaching his listeners to learn how to be better judges. By my interpretation, the myth is more about teaching a man to fish than giving him one. This myth is an attempt to offer a way for people to become philosophers; to strip off the confines of their physical concerns and to see the true world. Hence, I would agree with Daniels' assessment that the myth encourages, "...those of his audience who are not fully convinced atheists to be more thoughtful about their actions and the choices they make in

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[9] Daniels (1992), p. 275

life"[10].

The myth is not merely a summary of what has gone before, nor is it a tale told for amusement, nor is it only a scare tactic. The myth represents, in a very real way, Socrates trying to engage Callicles in the debate. As we have seen, the discussion was in danger of ending entirely by the time of the introduction of the myth. The dialogue had boiled down to a difference of opinion; Callicles placing value on things of this world and Socrates valuing those of the next. Had the debate remained at that level, it would have ended like a child's argument of, "*I* like this," versus "Well, *I* like that!" and getting neither participant anywhere. With the telling of the myth, Socrates is reaching out to Callicles to break from his habitual way of looking at the world. The myth is both polemical and discussion oriented: Socrates uses the myth to convince Callicles to look at the world by another light and it also gives him the means to do so. It is a story which suggests that there is another, better vantage point from which to make one's lifestyle choices. By telling a story about the soul, Socrates hopes to teach Callicles (and us) to learn to discern for ourselves what is truly important. It is offering more than consequentialist reasons for being just or telling the listeners that evil doers will get their just deserts - it is teaching people not only what are some factors in a good life but how to find other factors for themselves.

Having argued for an interpretation of what Socrates was trying to do, we now must ask the question, "Was he successful?" My answer, and one I think Socrates would agree with, is "Hardly." I say this because there is no evidence that

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[10] Daniels (1992), p. 277

Callicles is remotely convinced to change his ways. There are, I believe, two reasons for this: (1) Callicles is too enmeshed in his way of looking at the world to consider another vantage point and (2) Plato has not provided enough theoretical background to make his story even remotely plausible. Though (1) may not be able to be changed by Plato, (2) most certainly can. Plato's lesson remains at the hypothetical level of "Behave *as though* one were a discarnate soul." If the "as though" does not obtain in actuality then the need to follow moral guidelines is lessened. While judging "as though" one were a discarnate soul is a good way of discerning what is truly good, if physical death were indeed the only end, then someone like Callicles may respond that Plato's thought experiment is interesting though misguided. In other words, this thought experiment may indeed be useful in discerning what is good by Plato's definition, but it may have little effect in convincing anyone other than a theist or a person who believes in immortal souls to *act* in accordance with its findings. There is no evidence either that the sanctions Socrates talks about will obtain nor is there much guarantee that looking at the world by a philosophical light is a reliable way to proceed.

The fact that the end of the dialogue finds Callicles unaffected should hint that Plato has some response in mind. He could answer this criticism in at least two ways: (1) he can show that the soul is immortal and indeed subject to some kind of judgment or (2) he can demonstrate that the results of a philosophical inquiry can and must be trusted come what may. As we shall see in the following sections of the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*, his response will encompass both options. We will see that he argues strenuously for the immortality and reincarnation of the soul, but more importantly, his utmost faith rests in following the findings of

philosophy and leading a philosophical life no matter what the consequences. Hence, even though he believes that the sanctions do obtain, they in fact play no role in his decision to lead and encourage others to lead a philosophical life. He will defend a view that if one follows the guide of philosophy, then one's destiny will be a good one no matter what should happen in this world or the next.

IV. The Phaedo

While the *Phaedo* is in no way a sequel to the *Gorgias*, it does address the two main failings of the *Gorgias* myth. The *Phaedo* both provides multiple proofs for the immortality of the soul and attempts to restore the interlocutors' faith in philosophy through argument and myth. This dialogue therefore builds on the *Gorgias*, but in doing so is both similar and dissimilar. It resembles the *Gorgias* because the crowd does have some non-philosophical members. It is unlike the *Gorgias*, however, because the most important members of the crowd are Cebes and Simmias who are beginning to become philosophical. Moreover, the *Phaedo* adds to the *Gorgias* by not just positing that the soul is immortal, but arguing strenuously that it is. It breaks from the earlier work, however, by only briefly alluding to a *final* judgment (107d, 113d, 114b), while introducing the spectre of the transmigration of souls (81e-82b). Furthermore, through both argument and by positing that there is a way out of Hades (107de), it suggests that reincarnation is possible. In the end, however, the *Phaedo* as a whole and the myth at its end represents an attempt to restore confidence in philosophy, just as much as conveying some beliefs about the nature of the soul. To demonstrate this assertion, it is most important to look at the dramatic elements of the *Phaedo*, and how the myth fits into this drama[1]. Next, I will briefly explore what the philosophical argument has established up to the introduction of the myth, which will show the very minimal doctrine to which Socrates is attached. Finally, I will look at the

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[1] I owe a great deal to Kenneth Dorter's Article, "The Dramatic Aspect of Plato's Phaedo," *Dialogue* 8 (1970), pp. 564-580. It is a very insightful look into the workings of the dialogue.

major aspects of the myth, and suggest why I take them to be significant contributions to encouraging faith in philosophy and discouraging the fear of death. As we will see, Socrates himself can be seen as a kind of mythical hero who, responding to the crying and lamenting of the audience (59a), guides them to safety (85cd)[2].

The spindle around which the dialogue turns is the Theseus myth told by Phaedo (58aff)[3]. In response to Echecrates' question as to why there was a delay between Socrates' trial and execution, Phaedo states that there was a festival honouring Theseus' slaying of the Minotaur. In the past, Minos used to demand that fourteen young people be put on a ship and sent to Delos, where they would be devoured by the Minotaur. One year, Theseus volunteered to travel with the youths and upon his arrival at Crete, killed the Minotaur. The Athenians had promised that if the young people were saved, they would send a ship every year in celebration of the event and keep the city pure while it was in voyage. Hence, no execution could take place during the time of the ship's passage, and since it had left only the day before Socrates' trial, his execution was delayed until its return.

Dorter exposes the significance of this story when he draws attention to the fact that like the ship, fourteen people in the audience are named other than Phaedo and Socrates. Moreover, Simmias compares the search for truth about the afterlife

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[2] References to safety and freedom from fear occurs "...no less than ten times between 100d8 and 101d2, and... again just before the conclusion of the [final] proof (105b6-8)." Dorter, *op. cit.*, p. 575.

[3] I cannot emphasize enough that the ideas about the dramatic setting for the *Phaedo* are taken from Dorter, *op. cit.*

to a long and dangerous voyage:

> One should achieve one of these things: learn the truth about these things or find it for oneself, or, if that is impossible, adopt the best and most irrefutable of men's theories, and, borne upon this, sail through the dangers of life as upon a raft, unless someone should make that journey safer and less risky upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine (85cd).

Socrates can be seen as guiding a group of "philosophical youths" who are laughing at one moment, weeping at the next (59a). Their immaturity is further demonstrated by their inability to reply to Socrates even at his urgings (86d), their fear of death (67de) and their uncontrolled weeping (117ce). The minotaur that Socrates seeks to slay is two headed: he wishes to quash the fear of nothingness after death (77de) and the threat of misology (88c-91c). Of the first, Socrates sees that his interlocutor quakes as a child; "...you seem to have a childish fear that the wind literally blows a soul to bits when it quits the body, and scatters it in all directions, more especially if one happens to die when it's blowing a full gale" (77de). The very situation, where Socrates is faced with death yet fears it the least while the others are acting like "women" (60b) when they are in no danger, hints at the dramatic stance of a true, caring hero. His way of dealing with the fear is somewhat unSocratic for Phaedo remarks that Socrates received the comments of the "young men" with pleasure, kindness and respect (89a) while he took note of, and healed their distress. He saw that the audience was in danger of falling into misology which he describes as, "...the worst thing that can befall a man..." (89d). Thus, rather than taking a combative tone with those who doubted him, Socrates became their paternal figure, easing their fears and rallying them to victory

together (89a).

In this dialogue, references to conviction and persuasion abound[4], while Socrates seems to depart from the role of dialectician and takes on the role of combatant. Socrates portrays himself as the singer of incantations (77e-78a), and at the climax of the dialogue where Phaedo makes his only entrance, Socrates says:

> ...let us never entertain the idea that all arguments are probably unsound; let us rather believe that it is we ourselves who are not yet sound, but should manfully exert ourselves to become so; you, Phaedo, and you others out of regard for your remaining lifetime, I out of regard for death itself; for very possibly it is not a love of wisdom that I am showing on this present issue, but that love of defeating an opponent which goes with utter lack of culture (89e-91a).

Socrates explicitly argues that he is a seeker of victory *in contrast to* a philosopher, and the victory he seeks is clearly one over the unmanly fear of death and mistrust of arguments (89d). He enlists the help of Cebes and Simmias, urging them to think of as many opposing arguments as they can muster; for only then will they be guaranteed that the conclusion they reach is not led astray by enthusiasm (91c). Even on his last day, Socrates does not assume that he has carte-blanche to lecture his friends. Rather, he encourages them to take the philosophical quest for themselves; to those of whom he asked questions, he now urges that they ask questions of themselves. True to his method of dialectic to the end, he rallies his troops around him for one last display of the power of philosophy to reach answers.

There is one last note that should tie up the dramatic elements of the *Phaedo* quite nicely, namely, the biography of Phaedo himself. Phaedo was a native of Elis

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[4] See Chapter 1, n. 14

and was taken prisoner by the Athenians to become a slave. Socrates succeeded in freeing Phaedo from slavery and converted him to a life of philosophy. Dorter remarks:

> ...the dialogue is pre-eminently about bondage and liberation - the theme runs through the work: Socrates' literal imprisonment, the imprisonment of the soul within the body, the imprisonment of reason by pleasure and pain, the confinement of man to hollows in the earth, his imprisonment in the subterranean rivers, and the modes of liberation from these bondages, as well as Socrates' account of his ascent to philosophy...[5]

The *Phaedo* is a study in the freeing of the mind from the tyranny of habit and the attachment to material things. The discussion that Socrates has with his friends in prison is meant to give them the courage to turn and walk out of the cave and not to fear the consequences of leading a good and intelligent life. He convinces and persuades his friends to undo the shackles that they have put on themselves. He is Theseus, protecting and guiding them to safety.

Having established that the main task before Socrates is to crush the fear of nothingness after death and to encourage faith in argument, we must next explore how he goes about doing so. His first attempt to deal with the issue revolves around strict philosophical argument. In other words, his entire project hinges on how he deals with the first prong of the dilemma; if he successfully *demonstrates* that there is nothing to fear in death, then *that* demonstration will have *ipso facto* provided a reason to believe in argument. To deal with the fear of nothingness

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[5] Dorter (1970), pp. 567-568

after death, Socrates begins by attempting to demonstrate that the soul is immortal. As we will presently see, however, this view of immortality is quite narrow. I have chosen to call it an "impersonal" view because the part of the soul that survives the death of the body is a source of motion and a life-force which can know the universal Ideas but retains nothing of its individuality. I do not believe that Plato would wish to defend the view that after death, the soul retains any of its individuality. Perhaps to sustain his interlocutors' faith, however, he keeps this stark and somewhat unattractive belief implicit. Only when it comes time for the story does he describe the soul as being individual after death. Thus, as we will see, the view of the soul which he defends in most of the "dialectical"[6] aspect of the *Phaedo* does not encompass any idea of a personality with particular memories surviving, for only the memories of the Ideas will remain.

In response to Cebes' demand to, "...show that the soul exists when the man has died, and possesses some power and intelligence" (69b), Socrates must offer some "persuasive arguments" (69b). While it would be a thesis in itself to explore the three (or four) arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, I will briefly survey their highlights by pointing at why I take them to defend an impersonal view of the immortal soul. The first argument, for example, is based on the Heraclitean point that opposites are generated from opposites; the beautiful from the ugly, the just from the unjust, the dead from the living and vice versa. If there were only a linear process, for example, if everything only combined and

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[6] While I have not included the myth in what I refer to as the "dialectical" aspect of the *Phaedo*, I do not mean to say that the myth does not fulfil a dialectical role. Quite the contrary. I have simply chosen to name the part of the dialogue outside the myth "dialectical" to distinguish the stringent argument from the story.

nothing separated, then eventually everything would be together. Or, if a soul only died and did not come back to life, then eventually every living thing would be dead. A proviso must be inserted here, however, that this argument depends on nothing new being created. The motion of the universe, which depends on opposites producing each other, must therefore be cyclical rather than linear. Socrates then concludes that souls themselves must have cyclical lifetimes and are therefore immortal, and he also suggests that the first argument can apply to not only mankind, but to the whole of the animal and vegetable world (70d). The fact that he offers two more arguments to supplant this first one may suggest that he did not take this to be an irrefutable demonstration on its own. Moreover, all that this argument proves is that the human soul has power, not intelligence, not to mention a power that is common to all things in the universe. This argument does provide a hint to Plato's belief in reincarnation, however. If things die, then they must come back to life for the motion of the universe to continue. At best, therefore, the first argument shows that the soul is a motive force that must exist perpetually for the universe to continue - far from the personal immortality story related in the myth at the *Phaedo's* conclusion.

The second argument, the argument from recollection, is an attempt to meet Cebes second demand that the soul have some kind of intelligence. The basic outline of this argument is that since we *know* when we have knowledge in this life, we must have an idea of what it is to have knowledge in that particular area. If we had not been exposed to that knowledge before in one's incarnate life, then we must have had some kind of pre-natal experience of which knowledge in this life is a reminder. After defending his view about recollection, Socrates goes on to

argue that it must stand or fall with the doctrine of the forms (76e); if one shows that the forms are eternal, then one knows that the soul is eternal and vice versa. His description of the mind depends on the notion that knowledge is only possible when like knows like. Since the Ideas are eternal, so must be the thing that knows them. On this picture of knowledge, the mind becomes the objects of its knowledge in a sense. But what kind of immortality is Socrates defending in this second argument? I agree with Dorter's contention that, "...this does not imply any more personality than the identity-absorbing world-soul or Averroean 'active intellect'"[7]. The true eternal, immortal souls co-exist and know the forms, but there is no desire, love or passions. They have no memory of particular and impermanent things, for once one grasps the Truth, it is not something that can be forgotten. Thus far, the immortality of the soul that he has argued for is a motive force shared with the rest of the universe and an intelligence that is pure and impersonal.

The third argument is both the longest and most complicated. Though it would be outside the scope of this paper to take one through its meanderings, pitfalls and merits, one thing is certain; by the end of the argument, Socrates has defended the notion that to be a soul is to be alive. There is some question as to whether Socrates holds that it exists always and is alive, or, whether he means that when it exists, it is always alive[8], but I take this ambiguity itself to be intentional for

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[7] Dorter (1970), p. 576

[8] See Cobb (1977), Dorter (1976), Hackforth (1950), Hackforth (1972), Luce (1952), Cherniss (1953), Bluck (1955) for some of the discussion on this controversy.

Socrates himself draws attention to this fact (106d). The least one can conclude from this argument is that soul is a life-force, but this life-force is again, impersonal. Moreover, there is an explicit reference back to the argument from the generation of opposites (103a), linking the life-force notion with the idea of the soul as the motion of the universe. Contained in this link is a hint to the notion of a world-soul, but in the *Phaedo*, however, it remains just a hint; far from the fully developed notion of the *Timaeus*.

Thus, the first argument lays the groundwork for a doctrine of reincarnation, the second demonstrates that the soul has knowledge after death (or before birth) while the third argues that the soul is kind of life-force. It seems to me, and would have occurred to someone with the philosophical acuity of Socrates, that a significant amount more of argumentation is required to prove that the soul retains any sort of personality after death, or show that it is anything other that a kind of "active intellect" once it becomes discarnate. Suffice it to say, however, that Socrates believes that he has provided some sort of response to the charge that the soul must have some kind of "power and intelligence" after death.

Some of his interlocutors, however, suggest that the arguments are open to doubt (84c, 85cd, 107b) and when Phaedo makes his only entrance in the dialogue (88b-90d), the confidence in the proofs offered so far is shattered by the weaver and cloak argument. In the passage where Socrates refers to himself as a singer of incantations, Cebes urges Socrates to convince him differently (77e-78a), while after the third and most certain argument, Simmias expresses some doubt about the certainty of the conclusions (107ab). Socrates agrees with Simmias and urges him to examine the original assumptions more carefully and follow the argument

from there as far as he can go. Thus, Socrates must be aware that even though he has given some fine arguments, still others are not convinced. The reason for this scepticism may spring from the rising misology that was felt; while the proofs may have been enough to convince someone who trusts argument, Socrates is in a room where the very reliability of argument is under scrutiny. Hence, using argument to show that argument is reliable may not get him very far, so he must think of another tack.

Thus, enter the myth. The function of the myth is not to establish that the soul is *immortal* by another means of argumentation or rhetoric. It seems that as much as possible has been done to establish immortality by the time the myth makes its entrance. In short, the myth allows Socrates to give reasons and promote trust in the guiding power of philosophy. In other words, the myth attacks the second prong of the dilemma, misology, in attempt to give his response to the first, immortality, more credence. Rather than proceeding with more argument, he offers a story about the need for philosophy, a story that can be used as an incantation when one begins to doubt the power of philosophy. The myth does not offer an explanation about the immortal soul with less probability, rather, it does what philosophy could not do. It promotes the trust in philosophy by telling a story about the constant need for it (for he shows that its help is necessary even in death), giving the interlocutors faith in the process that has already occurred. To illustrate the relation between myth and philosophy that I think the *Phaedo* is trying to promote, I would describe philosophy as a language and myth as the metalanguage. Where the arguments failed to convince the listeners, it was not

because of a failure of the arguments themselves but a mistrust of the listeners to even grant that the language is valid. So, Socrates moves to the metalanguage of myth to try and restore that faith. In talking about philosophy through myth, Socrates does not try to prove anything more about immortality itself, but rather shows that what has already been proven in the argument can be trusted.

As has been noted, the *Phaedo* myth glosses over much of the discussion about the judgment of the soul and centres on the need to lead one's life according to philosophy. It begins and ends with cautions about the care of the soul;

> It is right to think then, gentlemen, that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care not only for the time we call our life, but for the sake of all time... (107c)
>
> [My instructions are] nothing new, Crito, but what I am always saying, that you will please me and mine and yourselves by taking good care of your own selves in whatever you do... (115b)

The myth focuses on the soul's leaving the body and travelling to Hades (107d-108c) and its relationship to other souls (113d-114c) and in both aspects, Socrates explicitly argues that philosophy is key. In the myth's journey to Hades, two aspects are emphasized: (1) the need for a guardian spirit because (2) the road to Hades has many forks and crossroads and it is easy to become lost. The guardian spirit knows the right path, and through this education, it can lead the soul to safety. Meanwhile, some souls are so attached to their bodies that they shun guides and end up wandering alone and lost in the underworld (108b). This section of the myth seems clearly allegorical, for the guardian spirit can be interpreted as a teacher, be it a person educated in philosophy as most people need (Letter VII, 341c), or philosophy itself. Without the guidance of a teacher or

philosophy, one will go astray even after life; philosophy is therefore of the highest importance. This lesson foreshadows the main lesson from the myth of Er, for both myths urge that every decision and every crossroad demands that philosophy be one's guide for if one allows habit to dictate, the worst of fates will result.

Following this lesson about the need for a guide is an extended cosmology taken from accepted wisdom and science of the day (108e-113d). While it is inappropriate to dismiss this lengthy description as mere play, I choose to interpret the cosmology passage as an attempt to lend certainty to a somewhat controversial moral lesson: by piggy-backing the belief that philosophy ought to be one's guide on an extensive "scientific" treatment of the afterlife, I believe that Socrates hoped to garner support for his moral imperative. This interpretation is supported by Socrates' statement at the conclusion of the myth, "No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them..." (114d). Though this disclaimer is too broad for us to say that he did not truly believe any of the cosmology, I think it warrants us to be sceptical of the closeness with which it is held. Though the cosmology passage occupies the bulk of the myth, it has very little to teach those who cower in the face of death. By cloaking his message in and through science, Socrates hoped to gain conviction and give strength to his true intent, namely, to emphasize the constant need for philosophy, for since it is necessary even in death, one ought to encourage faith in it in life.

After the cosmology passage, Socrates returns the myth to its moral centre. In the concluding section we find the only place in any of his myths where Socrates makes an explicit statement about condemned soul's need of forgiveness from those it has wronged (114ab). This fact points to a moral interpretation of the myth

rather than the "theological" teaching of the gods being the punishers or the exact details about the "true earth." There is comparatively little discussion about punishments and rewards, while there is a considerable treatment of the excellence of the soul and the proper behaviour of man. The Minotaur of the fear of death is assaulted not only by the arguments for the immortality of the soul outside the myth, but also by the belief that if one has lived a good, philosophical life, the soul will not linger with the body (108ac). To attack misology, he supplements the argument that the excellence of the soul lies in its separation from the body (80d-82c) by recounting that the true philosopher will enjoy rewards in a place even more beautiful than Heaven (114c). In the last sentence of the myth, Socrates urges;

> But now, Simmias, having regard to all these matters of our tale, we must endeavour ourselves to have part in goodness and intelligence while this life is ours; for the prize is glorious, and great is our hope thereof (114c).

The message is clearly and loudly sent; even at the hour of death and after, do not pander to the laws of this world, avoid making decisions without philosophy and shun mere physical pleasures. Socrates tells Simmias to use this myth as an incantation (114d) and as a constant reminder to be "of good cheer" (114d) if one has led one's life by philosophy. The myth, therefore, is not an *argument* for the power of philosophy nor a *demonstration* of the immortality of the soul, it is rather a kind of charm to be used when one is doubting philosophy's power. In saying the myth to oneself, one is reassured that philosophy is a necessary and reliable guide, and so one can proceed with such things as proving the immortality of the soul

with vigour. The myth furthers the discussion that preceded it not by proving that the soul is immortal by citing oracular truth, but rather urges faith in the power of philosophy to be the only guide to arrive at the truth.

The *Phaedo* myth is substantially similar, therefore, to the *Gorgias* myth, though it does differ in some subtle respects. For example, the *Phaedo* myth makes explicit reference to a way *out* of Hades (107de), and the dialogue itself contains an earlier passage (outside the myth) to the transmigration of souls into the bodies of animals (81e-82b). The reference to a two way street to Hades coincides with the first argument for immortality, the argument from opposites. While it clearly deviates from the *Gorgias'* emphasis on final judgment, it does mark the beginning of Plato's trend to argue for reincarnation, as we will see in the *Republic* and *Timaeus*. Though Plato makes little of the hint in this dialogue, it will grow to be an integral part of his doctrines in the later ones. Meanwhile, though the context of the passage about the transmigration of souls indicates that it should not be taken seriously, Julia Annas argues that we have no reason to believe that Plato thought that transmigration is impossible[9]. Though I agree with Annas' position, we can at least call it unlikely. Moreover, though the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* further discuss transmigration, as we will see, the former again allows us to infer that Plato thought it unlikely while the latter strongly suggests that it is impossible. The *Phaedo* myth, therefore, again leaves us somewhat uneducated on the impact of discarnate existence on incarnate life. We are given nuggets of an indication of what is to come, for example the

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[9] Annas (1982), p. 127

possibility (one might say necessity) of reincarnation, but he gives us little more.

What the myth does do, however, is attempt to combat the audience's tendency *to misology and hence make the arguments for immortality more trustworthy.* Socrates had to step outside the domain of strict philosophical argument to make philosophy more palatable; in building up the audience's trust in argument through this incantation, Socrates was indirectly building up the argument itself. As one commentator notes:

> The point is not to prove immortality, but to persuade one who lacks true knowledge to attempt the philosophic life. Since the misologist has lost confidence in the power of argumentation, his commitment to philosophy must be restored by other means.[10]

Thus, the *Phaedo* and *Gorgias* myths play much the same role; they attempt to accomplish in myth what Socrates was unable to do in philosophy. While they appear to be about the afterlife, they are mostly about the power of philosophy in *this* life. The *Gorgias* myth represents an attempt to get a non-philosophical man to think philosophically; he goes "outside" philosophy to bring someone into the fold. The *Phaedo* myth, meanwhile, is told to heighten the faith of philosophical youths; yet again, Socrates goes outside the realm of philosophy only to promote a return. In these dialogues, therefore, Plato uses myth as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. They are not used to teach about the afterlife nor are they intended to promote a non-rational way of looking at the world. Just the opposite is true. They explore the need, the power and build trust in the reliability of philosophy. In going "outside" philosophy, these myths attempt to give people the faith to turn people towards a rational discourse.

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[10] Cobb, (1977), p. 176

V. The Myth of Er

In the myth of Er, talk of the Fates, reincarnation and destiny make a full blown entrance. For all its bluster, however, the message is relatively similar to that offered by the myths of the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo*; since one is held responsible for all one's decisions and actions, then if one is guided by philosophy, virtue and happiness will result. There is one major difference in the change between the *Gorgias* or *Phaedo* myths and Er, however; gone is any choice *within* a life while the rewards and punishments meted out at the end of one's life have more to do with the choice one makes *before* life, than the choices one makes in it. Once a choice of lives has been made, the soul is bound by necessity to the outcome of that choice. As I will demonstrate, however, this message is present to emphasize the lesson that each choice *in* life is like the choice *of* life as described in the myth. In making any choice, the unphilosophical must learn what makes a good teacher and follow that teacher's advice, be it the advice of a person educated in philosophy or philosophy itself. For the philosophical themselves, they must always take the time to base their choices in philosophy, not habit, for the truth is there for those who seek. When one is properly prepared by a philosophical education, one can be confident that virtue in life will inevitably be chosen; directing one's life by philosophy will make one self-sufficient and only then will the fates of the person, state and universe sing in harmony.

Generally speaking, the myth of Er is a response to what Plato characterizes as the inadequate poetry of the day. Plato thought that the tragic and epic poetry of the past celebrated the frailty of man and wallowed in pity and lamentation, thus discouraging the calculative part of the soul from being in charge. Book X opens

with Socrates reviewing why poetry has been expelled from the city, citing three main reasons for its banishment. The first failing of poetry, argues Socrates, is that it makes those who do not have professional knowledge appear to be experts (595c-602c). For example, Homer speaks "...about wars and commands of armies and governances of cities, and about the education of a human being..." (599c) but no city will testify that he is in fact a general, a politician or a teacher. He is a "craftsman of a phantom" (599c), an imitator who sees what a true general does and copies it. Thus, poets like Homer write as though they have knowledge, but in fact they only imitate those who actually do. The first danger of poetry, therefore, is to make the imitators, those people three removes from reality, to appear like craftsmen, those who are only two.

The second failing of poetry is that it has the capacity to make appearances seem real. For example, by such means as, "...shadow painting and puppeteering and many other tricks..." (602d), painters are able to make the smaller look larger, the light look heavy and vice versa. By doing so, the audience begins to trust how a thing appears while measuring and calculating it would reveal an entirely different result. Socrates then goes on to argue that if painters can make people believe something false, so, too must the poets (603bc). Imitators make people believe contrary things, making them think that a thing appears close but is in fact far away and it is therefore misleading and obfuscating.

This second line of argument then leads to the third and "...greatest accusation against imitation" (605c), namely, that imitation trains the lesser, irrational and unreliable part of the soul to control the calculative part (603e-608b). Plato variously testifies to the belief that poetry wrongly celebrates weakness and

vulnerability while discouraging self-sufficiency. He argues that, "One must not behave like children who have stumbled and who hold on to the hurt place and spend their time in crying out..." (604c). He also believes that remembering suffering and complaints is irrational, idle and cowardly (604d). Furthermore, since these emotions are both easier to imitate and to understand (604e), poets have a tendency to imitate the irritable and various disposition (605a) rather than the noble and virtuous one. Homer is said to imitate in all seriousness, "...heroes in mourning and making quite an extended speech with lamentation, or, if you like, singing and beating his breast..." (605cd). Plato thinks that poetry encourages imitation and all this commiserating is unhealthy for the soul. Only a certain few men (presumably the philosophers) are capable of witnessing this outpouring of sorrow without being adversely affected (606b). For the rest, these displays of childish weakness:

> ...awakens [the part of the soul that is not concerned with truth] and nourishes it, and, by making it strong, destroys the calculating part, just as in a city when someone, by making wicked men mighty, turns the city over to them and corrupts the superior ones (605b).

Plato's view of a virtuous man is that when one is faced with a situation where lament may be felt (like losing a son (604c)), one should fight the pain and not show distress in public. He urges that, "One must accept the fall of the dice and settle one's affairs accordingly - in whatever way argument declares would be best" (604c). One must be strong in the face of adversity, have confidence in oneself and avoid cowering in "womanly" lament (605e). To be such a strong character, however, one must be adequately prepared.

Obviously, philosophy is the tool of preparation to which Plato turned. To convey his beliefs in philosophy to those who were not philosophical, however, was quite difficult for the poets enjoyed a great deal of influence in Plato's day. Thus, quite like the *Gorgias*, Socrates turns to a different medium to get his point across. I will use an analogy to convey my point; television, like the poets of old, serves to influence the behaviour patterns of its audience. Suppose that there is someone like Peter, however, who firmly believes that books contain all the right lessons that people must learn. It would not do Peter any good to write more books trying to convince people to stop watching T.V., because those who watch T.V. do not read books at all. So, Peter chooses to get a T.V. show, and perform a story that somehow redirects the listeners to reading books. Perhaps the show will portray the success of the lead character as depending entirely on his having read books. So, too, with the myth of Er. It is a myth which shows the power and need to base one's choices in philosophy. Socrates engages in a "Platonic approved" myth to get those who listen to myths, those who are weak, waffling and emotion driven, to reign in their souls and direct themselves by philosophy.

The myth itself falls very naturally into five sections:

I. 614b-616a - Introduction: general description of Er's journey, process of dividing and judging the souls.

II. 616b-618b - Cosmology and introduction to the process of selecting a new life.

III. 618b-619a - Climax: interruption by Socrates about the value of education.

IV. 619b-620d - Narration by Er, consequences of allowing habit rather than philosophy determine one's choices.

V. 620d-621c - Sealing the fate of the souls, Er's return to life, note on value placed on the myth.

To make clear where the lessons of the myth of Er are taken, I have chosen to give a brief description of each section and follow that by what I take to be most important in that section. By this method of exposition, what may be lost in the flow of the myth will be more than compensated by accuracy and precision of interpretation.

(614b-616a) The myth begins by describing how "Once upon a time..." a man by the name of Er was killed in a war. The corpses were left for ten days, but while the others had decayed his remained well preserved. When it came time to set his body on a funeral pyre on the twelfth day, he came back to life. Getting up, he told of his journey to a demonic place where there were two openings in both the earth and heaven. At this place, judges sent those who were to be punished or rewarded to their respective places through these passageways. Er spends a significant amount of time describing the punishment that the souls had endured. Those who were unjust would pay ten times for every cruel act; whether one had caused the death of many by betrayal, reduced others to slavery, were impious or committed murder. These souls were compared to even more corrupt people like tyrants and some private men who were made examples of because they were incurably wicked. He seems to make a special effort to describe the gruesome detail of how the incurable were, "...stripped of their skin... dragged along the wayside, carding them like wool on thorns..." (616a). In contrast, there is very little discussion about the rewards of the virtuous. Meanwhile, the souls that were returning from heaven and below the earth met in a meadow where they

exchanged information about the other place; to tell of the sufferings they had endured or of the inconceivable beauty they encountered.

This introduction to the afterlife is similar to the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo* in that judgment is mentioned, though it occupies only a passing phrase. This section of the myth emphasizes three aspects of life in the hereafter; (1) the return from heaven or hell, (2) the chance to exchange information between the groups who had gone to those places and (3) the punishment one receives for leading a poor life. Julia Annas cites the notion of the return from heaven or hell as an indication that Socrates abandons any attempt to provide a consequentialist reason for being just[1]. Though I agree that the notion of reincarnation does exclude any idea of a final judgment, taking the third aspect of this section of the myth into account, there still remains a residual consequentialist reason for being just. It may not be the focus as it is in the *Gorgias,* but it still sends alarm bells to those who refuse to act virtuously. For those who are unphilosophical, the literal interpretation of the image of being dragged across thorns with no skin provides very real consequences for not acting virtuously. For a certain segment of the population, therefore, Socrates has explicitly maintained some notion of a consequentialist view of justice, though as I will demonstrate immediately, he does not think that this is *all* one needs to convince others to act virtuously.

The consequentialist hints are superseded by the passage about souls from both places camping for seven days and sharing with each other their experiences. Even though those who are tired and dirty warn those who come from heaven

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[1] Annas (1982), p. 130

about the suffering that one is subjected to if one is corrupt, many still do not learn that injustice does not pay (619c). I interpret the passage about the meadow to demonstrate that consequentialist reasons are *not enough* to undeniably convince someone to act virtuously. If someone from heaven hears of the pain and suffering of another who has gone to hell, but then proceeds to choose a life that is fated to be evil, then it shows that threats of punishment alone may be ineffective. I take this introductory passage to have two functions, therefore; (1) it can be used as a kind of wake-up call[2] to those that are unjust and get them thinking about their lives and (2) it also hints that the wake-up call is only a beginning. The passage about the meadow is an indication of how to read the myth; do not read it to look only for details about punishments or rewards of the afterlife, for if you do, you may end up choosing an evil course of life. Look beyond the consequences to the true method of choosing a life, and as I will show, if that method is based in philosophy and not in habit, you will be strong and virtuous.

(616b-618b) Following the stay in the meadow, the souls resume their journey on the eighth day. After a four day trek, the journeying is complete and they come to a place where they can see, "...a straight light, like a column, stretched from above through all of heaven and earth" (616b). He describes the spindle of necessity, "by which all the revolutions are turned," and the eight whorls which are fitted together like bowls within bowls; as they turn together, a siren which is perched on each of them sings and together they produce a harmony. There is also an elaborate description about the numerical relation of each of the whorls to the

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[2] Pun intended.

others and the colours produced by each of them, lending a feeling that this description was not a haphazard fabrication.

Around these whorls are seated the daughters of necessity, the Fates - Lachesis (of the past), Clotho (of the present) and Atropos (of the future). As the souls arrive at this place, they go directly to Lachesis where they receive the following command from one of her representatives;

> A demon will not select you, but you must choose a demon. Let him who gets the first lot make the first choice of a life to which he will be bound by necessity. Virtue is without a master; as he honours her, each will have more or less of her. The blame belongs to him who chooses; god is blameless (617de).

With this in mind, the souls cast lots to determine the order of choosing a life. Er is careful to mention that there are more lives to choose from than there are souls present, including animal lives and many varieties of human ones. He indicates that the souls choose from an unlimited selection of the kind of life one wishes to pursue, from tyrants to poor, sick and healthy,"...and also with the states intermediate to these" (618b).

The description of the cosmology occupies a significant portion of this section of the myth, with the mathematical relations of the whorls and their colours described in great detail. Though some may argue that Plato intended this for serious consideration, I am not sure that one should take it literally. One must remember that numericization played an important role in Greek intellectual life. As Martha Nussbaum remarks:

> An examination of fifth and early fourth century uses of words associated with measure and quantitative commensurability shows that

> they come freighted with heavy cognitive and ethical associations: what is measurable or commensurable is graspable, knowable, in order, good; what is without measure is boundless, elusive, chaotic, threatening, bad.[3]

The cosmology does lend this section of the myth a degree of 'scientific' certitude, but at the same time it can be seen as a preamble to the speech of the representative of Lachesis quoted above (617de). Jumping ahead a bit, we can observe that the next time the spokesman speaks, he tells the souls that no matter where they are in the line of selection, they all have a chance to lead virtuous lives (619b). This 'spokesman' represents the overriding message of the myth as a whole, for even given the significant cosmology about necessity and the Fates, still the responsibility for choosing a good life lies with the soul. Though the whorls spin around the spindle of necessity and the sirens produce a harmony, still the "...blame belongs to him who chooses." Moreover, this excerpt from the spokesman addresses what Plato sees as the main failing of the poetry of the past; for it urges people to take responsibility for their own lives and to be strong in that choice. Do not cry or lament for your lot, rather, accept that it is of your own doing and take measures to ensure that it is as good as possible.

This message is reinforced by the notion that there is no limit to the kind of life one wishes to choose. Each soul, whether it chooses first or last, has a cornucopia of kinds of lives to select, so one cannot abandon oneself to the claim that there was no choice in becoming the kind of person one is. In holding this, Plato shuts off one avenue of escape for the non-virtuous; those who claim "I was born with

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[3] Martha Nussbaum (1986), p. 107

this character or station, therefore I am blameless" have no leg to stand on. Deferrals to "nature" or "genetic lotteries" will get one no where in the spokesman's mind, for one is responsible for one's nature. As we will see (619b), not only is the information about the *kind* of person one will be available to the soul, but the specific path one will take can also be known. This section urges, therefore, that though the Fates preside over a soul's selection of life, since a variety is there for the knowing and taking, it is the soul's responsibility for its choice. That is why the noble lie is a "lie" not a "fiction"[4]. If one heeds the speech of the spokesman, one will see that it is not the Fates that determine the kind of person you are, but you yourself.

(618b-619a) It is at this point in the myth where Socrates interrupts the narration of Er and tells Glaucon what he takes to be the message of Er's visit;

> And on this account each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible (618bc).

Yet again, Socrates argues that one must take charge of one's life and be a seeker of knowledge. He does not say let the Fates dictate, but rather argues that it is one's personal duty to determine one's own good fate based on knowledge. Socrates

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[4] Janet Smith (1985) argues that it is perhaps better to call what has been traditionally known as the "noble lie" as a "noble fiction" because a lie indicates that a fact is known and one deliberately misinforms, while in a fiction, there is no reference about which one may be wrong. Whether it be taken literally or figuratively, however, this passage in the myth clearly indicates that Plato holds one is responsible for one's character, so any attempt to blame it on the gods would indeed be a "lie" not merely a "fiction."

urges Glaucon to be a student of the study of finding the best *teacher*, of finding who will give him the capacity and knowledge to be virtuous. It is important to note that Socrates is not urging Glaucon to be a student of making good choices, but to learn how to seek a teacher who will be able to instruct him on such matters. Glaucon, it seems, is three removes from a truly moral person[5]. On this schema, there are at least four levels; (1) the Virtuous Life, (2) a good teacher of the Virtuous Life, (3) a student of that teacher and (4) those searching for a teacher. One of the steps along the way to finding out what is moral is finding out how to look for a teacher and once one has discerned what makes a good teacher, then one can begin to learn what it is to be moral. This myth appears to be aimed at those in the fourth group, the unphilosophical who need teachers. Thus, speaking in strict "philosophical" terms may not have resulted in anyone listening, so Socrates turns to myth. He implies that if one knows how to choose a teacher, then one is very well on the way to leading a happy life and the myth represents an attempt to teach people how to choose that guide.

This teacher will know what is truly important, he will know which kinds of lives lead to virtue and which do not. He will be able to study the various mixtures that life offers and determine which is the more just; he will be able to separate the idea of wealth, property and power from the true nature of the life, and determine what life will make the person happiest (619b). It should be evident that this process of finding the right path through the multitude of

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[5] Just as Glaucon needs to be reformed, so, too, does bad poetry which is also three removes from reality. Glaucon and bad poetry, it seems, are merely copies of copies.

variables is an echo of the *Phaedo's* concern for the need of a guide through the twisty road in heaven. It should also be noted that this myth is like that of the *Gorgias*, for they are both told to get people to look at their lives through another perspective. In talking about the need for a teacher to educate oneself so that one can make the right choice of life, Socrates could be speaking about this world. This again could be viewed as a kind of thought experiment or creating a T.V. show to encourage reading; in telling the unphilosophical a story about how they should select a life, Socrates is using a different medium to effect a return to philosophy. Learning why Philosophy is the best teacher is perhaps the hardest step in leading a just life, for once one has learned that, then philosophy teaches us to discern what is truly important. This myth urges above all, therefore, that a good choice depends on the process of judgment rather than looking to the consequences. One must not be like the foolish people returning from heaven: the only way to guarantee that one's choice will be virtuous is to apply a philosophical approach. Thus this myth gets its listeners on the road to recognizing the need for philosophy now by speaking about its use in the afterlife. Philosophy can teach those in Hades what is the best life and if philosophy is adhered to, it will breed a choice that will *of necessity* lead to happiness in *this* life.

(619b-620d) When Er's narration continues after Socrates' brief interlude, he quotes the spokesman who argues that no matter where the soul lands in the process of selection, each has a chance to live virtuously (619b). He then illustrates how the virtue of the soul is affected in the afterlife by describing how the first soul selected its life. As a citizen of heaven, this soul was not used to labouring over choices and became driven by gluttony and folly (619b). As a result,

it chose the life of a tyrant without noticing that in that life, he was fated to eat his children (619c). In contrast, those who had laboured in the earth were not in a rush to make a choice, and thus generally made good selections. Nevertheless, Er concludes that no matter what one's punishment or reward in the afterlife was, as long as one lives by philosophy, he will "...not only be happy here [in the afterlife] but also that he will journey from this world to the other and back again not by the underground, rough road but by the smooth one, through the heavens" (620e). Then, as if to drive this point home, Er describes the "...pitiable, laughable... [whose] choice was made according to the habituation of their former life" (620a). Because of the treatment they received in this life, these people chose the life of animals and vice versa. For example, Orpheus chose the life of a swan; because of his hatred for women, he did not want to be born of one. Furthermore, those that allowed themselves to be dictated to by previous beliefs are portrayed as foolish lions and apes (620bc).

This section of the myth provides the shading to enhance the sketch of the previous two. First and foremost, Er contends that so long as one's life or choice is dictated by philosophy and not by habit, then all will be well. Other than this standard lesson, though, what does it say? First, heaven is no longer portrayed as a final reward, as was the case in the *Gorgias* and hinted at in the *Phaedo*[6]. In fact, its effects dulled one soul's philosophical ability enough to make it choose the worst kind of life, the life of a tyrant. In contraposition, those who suffered

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[6] For example, in the passage where Socrates suggests that those who are philosophical will be freed forever from their bodies and sent to a place even better than heaven (Phaedo, 114c).

underneath the earth generally chose well. This, in combination with his insistence on a way out of heaven or hell, points to a strong adherence to reincarnation. In fact, this myth centres around reincarnation and nowhere does he hint that this aspect of the myth should not be taken literally. However, we may also take this section metaphorically, pointing to the lesson that if you receive rewards on this earth, do not grow complacent, for he has shown that one must guide one's life by philosophy even in heaven. Implicit in this excerpt is the notion that looking to the consequences of one's choice is not a reliable guide. Since what appears to be pleasurable can in fact be harmful and that which appears to be painful is in fact beneficial, the only reliable way to proceed is to base one's choice in philosophy.

Moreover, I would take passages such as, "...the soul of the buffoon Thersites, clothing itself as an ape" (620c) as a kind of rhetorical flourish. It demonstrates to those who are unphilosophical the utter folly of not guiding one's life by philosophy, while providing a kind of entertainment or play for those who are philosophical. So far, however, I must base my interpretation of the transmigration section on a hunch, no matter how well founded it may be. As with the *Phaedo*, it seems to be said in jest, but we have very little reason to dismiss it entirely as a joke as yet.

Finally, we must note that the soul seems to choose from among fully worked out blueprints of lives, rather than choosing a type or character of life. The soul that chooses the life of the tyrant does not notice the very specific fate of eating his child. In response to this, Julia Annas argues that freedom to choose between lives

is meaningless if one does not have the power to choose within a life[7]. The choice of life appears to rule out any future choices, thus one's life is absolutely fated to follow from that *one* choice. For those who are unphilosophical, the least this passage does is to argue that one must learn that philosophy is the best teacher; one must guide one's choice by philosophy, for otherwise, an evil fate will await. At this level, it is much the same as the *Gorgias* myth, urging people to engage in philosophy when given any choice. It delves beyond the *Gorgias,* however, in also speaking to those who are beginning to become philosophical: it tells them that when they are faced with a choice, all of the necessary knowledge is there if they but take the time to look. Do not rush through, but examine as many of the relevant factors as they can. The truth is there for those who seek; all it takes is the commitment to follow it through. For either the philosophical or unphilosophical, this myth does not deal with choices about death, but is squarely about life. It does not argue that one should take this path in Hades or that one in the Isles of the Blessed; rather, it urges one to look at life here on earth from another perspective and point out that the knowledge to lead a good life is present to those who take the time to see. Each of the choices in life can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis* for just as one must take time before the choosing *of* a life, one must take equal care in choosing *within* a life. I take the passage about the choice *of* a life to be like any choice *in* life; since any choice determines the kind of life you live, then ensure that your choosing is based in philosophy and not habit before you lock yourself into that particular course.

(620d-621b) The myth concludes by describing that once a life has been

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[7] Annas (1982), p. 133

selected, the souls are led by a demon to Clotho who ratifies the choice and to Atropos who makes it irreversible. They pass under the throne of necessity and drink from Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Then, they are brought to life again. Er did not drink from Lethe so that he would remember what had occurred there and be able to relate his story. Socrates ends the myth, and the *Republic*, by saying, "And thus, Glaucon, a tale was saved and not lost; and it could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river of Lethe and not defile our soul" (621bc).

In these concluding remarks, Socrates demonstrates that he is more concerned with saving the souls of those who listen, than conveying truths about the afterlife. Yet again, a myth appears to be squarely aimed at the moral life, rather than providing a strict cosmogony or account of judgment and wages in the hereafter. We are left with what should be by now a familiar refrain; a little metaphysical teaching is covered with heavily moral language. While reincarnation, destiny and Fate are mentioned, they are mostly used to show the need for philosophy and the capacity of man to determine his own life. This myth is an example of the kind of poetry Socrates wishes to encourage in his republic. In contrast to what he saw as the pity filled myths of old, Socrates provides a new model where self-sufficiency and confidence in philosophy abounds. It should be noted that Plato has very little faith in people to control their own emotions and he believes that poetry would be imitated straight off. This pessimistic view of the capacity of the non-philosophical to rule their own lives is combatted by his urgings that they take up with a teacher of philosophy. Pity and emotional outpouring are to be shunned completely, while the calculative aspect of the soul must be educated. In doing so, one will be loosed

from the "shackles" of emotion and become a self-directed and autonomous agent.

Though the surface of the text suggests that this myth is about the journey in the afterlife, it demonstrates that that journey is squarely concerned with the incarnate life. All of the punishment and rewards, the travelling and the exchange between the souls is directed towards a choice of life. It is not about how to survive the afterlife, but how to make a good choice of this one. To the unphilosophical, it challenges them to learn who is the best teacher and to learn from that teacher. To the philosophical, the teachers, it urges them to look and see what is the best course. For both groups, it shows that no matter what your character or situation is, do not blame the daemons for it is you who chooses (617de). The modern day craftsman's lesson, "Measure twice, cut once" may be applied. Make sure you have all of the necessary information before you make any choice, for once you act on that choice, it is made irreversible. It is entirely the individual's responsibility to be as good as possible given their proper circumstances; the best teachers are there, so seek them, and the knowledge is there, so invest the time to learn it.

VI. The Timaeus

While the *Timaeus* is a different kind of myth than the "eschatological" ones discussed previously, it substantiates many of the lessons that the previous myths alluded to. The main difference between the *Timaeus* and the others is that while the "eschatological" ones were directed at those who were either unphilosophical or only beginning to seek philosophy, the *Timaeus* represents a discussion of like-minded philosophers (29a). As such, this myth can be subjected to vigorous dialectical examination rather than being used as a kind of charm or introduction to philosophy: as I will show, it must be taken quite literally rather than allegorically or as a charm. Such an examination of the *Timaeus* will reveal many of the lessons that were left implicit in the other myths. For example, though talk of transmigration of souls and a permanent release from the world are presented in the *Timaeus*, I will show that once the true consequences of the words are teased out, it results in an argument *against* these phenomena. Furthermore, Plato explicitly argues that immortality and reincarnation do not maintain any semblance of a personality while he also links immortality with procreation. In the end, the *Timaeus* sets all of Plato's previous arguments and stories in support of people seeking philosophy in a cosmological context; the cosmos was created for the best and in a law-like manner for the ultimate end of humankind being guided by philosophy. In looking to the uniform motion of the stars, one can derive numerical laws from which science can be developed and finally, philosophy (47ab). The whole force of nature is directed towards people leading their life by a philosophical guide; for just as Reason shapes the universe for the best possible result, so philosophy will inform and lead people to happiness and immortality.

The first and perhaps the most challenging issue facing any reading of the *Timaeus* is the inevitable question: How literally should it be taken? The majority of scholars agree on one point, namely, that the burden of proof lies squarely with those who wish to deviate from a literal interpretation of the work[1]. The agreement seems to end there, however, for some think that purported inconsistencies in the text are signposts to reading it allegorically or "aesthetically"[2] while others dispute whether there are any inconsistencies whatsoever[3]. I support a literalist reading of the text, with some provisions, for the following reasons;

1. The repeated description of the logos or mythos as eikos (likely) and its cognates[4].

2. At 34bc and 61c, Timaeus points out that he has deviated from the actual process of creation for the purposes of exposition. Since he warns us when *not* to take him literally, when he does not offer such a warning, we may be entitled to infer that he expects us to take it more or less literally[5].

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[1] Eg. Leonardo Taran (1972), p. 374; Gregory Vlastos (1965) p. 380.

[2] eg. Taran (1972) and William J. Gavin (1975)

[3] Eg. Vlastos (1965), T.M. Robinson (1987), Donald J. Zeyl (1987) and R. Hackforth (1959).

[4] In the introduction it is used three times explicitly (29c2, 29c8, 29d2) and once implicitly (29b). It is used in reference to mythos three times (59c, 68d, 69c), and outside the introduction it is used fifteen times (30b, 34c, 44d, 48c, 48d, 49b, 53d, 55d, 56a, 56d, 57d, 59c, 68d, 72d, 90e). Vlastos (1965), p. 382

[5] T.M. Robinson (1987), p. 117

3. The natural implications of the language implies that we should take him literally[6].

4. In the introduction, Socrates goes to great lengths to describe Timaeus' qualifications and calls him a philosopher (20a).

5. As Gregory Vlastos writes; "It is a mistake to put it on a level with the great myths of the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* X, the *Phaedrus* and the *Politicus*. The Timaeus uses none of the devices by which all of these disavow the scientific seriousness of major features of their accounts"[7].

Though not one of these reasons is enough by itself to convince a reader to take the *Timaeus* literally, taken together they provide a very solid argument. We must guard against turning what Plato calls "likely" or "particularly likely" (44d) into "unlikely"[8]. It seems that those who doubt the seriousness of the *Timaeus* base much of their scepticism on Plato's calling it a mythos, but even then he calls it a *likely* one. He does not urge, as in the *Phaedo*, that it should be used as an incantation, nor does he argue that by believing it, we will be saved (*Rep.* 621a). Since there is no explicit warnings not take it literally, there seems to be very little basis to doubt the account except on unfounded "hunches".

Having argued for its likelihood, I will now insert a proviso; just because the whole of the *Timaeus* account is seriously meant does not preclude the possibility of some poetical excerpts. As I demonstrated in the first chapter, Plato is very

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[6] T.M. Robinson (1987), p. 117. Eg. He uses the past tense when talking about the pre-cosmos.

[7] Vlastos (1965), p. 380.

[8] T.M. Robinson (1987) p. 111.

much concerned about how the audience interacts with the text. One must not be a spectator but a participant in a dialogue and poetry prompts some audience members to become actors. Plato is not only a philosopher but an artist who will do whatever is in his power to seduce the audience to journey with him, to show them the world through his eyes. So though we must read the *Timaeus* with every intention to take what he says literally, still we must allow ourselves the possibility that some of the dialogue is written for rhetorical purposes. Suffice it to say that the burden of proof lies squarely with those who wish to deviate from the letter of the text, and though there are some potential contradictions[9], none are conclusive enough to warrant interpreting the *Timaeus as a whole* as allegory, metaphor or as a fictitious story.

One of the keys to reading the *Timaeus* is explicitly stated within the work. As is common in Plato's writing, the middle or centre plays an important role; in the case of the *Timaeus*, the middle of the dialogue (46de) provides an essential lesson in how to read the account and how to live one's life:

> [W]e must speak of both kinds of cause, but distinguish causes that work with intelligence to produce what is good and desirable, from those which, being destitute of reason, produce their sundry effects at random and without order (Tim. 46e).

This lesson encapsulates the whole of the *Timaeus*; it is a search for meaning and reason in the universe. The primary question facing the *Timaeus* is: What is the end to which the cosmos is directed? This question is an echo of Socrates' criticism

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[9] Eg. chaotic motion before the soul, the purported principle of motion, is introduced. Some have argued that the soul is the principle of *ordered* motion, not all motion in general. See Vlastos (1965), pp. 379-399, pp. 401-419

of Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo*, for Anaxagoras provided explanations only in terms of material or accessory causes, while Socrates was looking for a teleology. The study of the formation of the cosmos by the Demiurge is not intended only to reveal particular scientific doctrine, but to examine *why* the universe is as it is. When reading the *Timaeus*, we are urged not to devote too much attention to the lesser causes but to look for the telos behind the events. As I will presently explore, the *Timaeus* account presents different layers of the telos, each leading to the very practical conclusion that philosophy is the goal of man, the world was formed for philosophy's arrival and any deviation from philosophy would be immoral.

The first step on the way to the proof of philosophy's ultimate arrival is found in the teleology surrounding the Demiurge. The Demiurge was wholly good, without jealousy and desired that things come as near as possible to being like himself (29e). Judging that order is better than disorder (30a), he took over all that was in disordered motion and made it uniform. Furthermore, since intelligence is better than ignorance and intelligence can only reside in a soul, he created an intelligent soul for the universe (30b). By regarding only that which is best, the Demiurge created a world that is as excellent and perfect as possible (30b). It is clearly the case that the Demiurge had the *best*, or the *Good* as his telos. Since the Receptacle, or Necessity had a disordered kind of motion on its own (46e, 30a, 53b) and Reason could only persuade it (48a), however, the world is not another realm of the forms but only as good a copy as possible.

The Demiurge began his work by making the lesser gods primarily out of fire; he gave them intelligence and a round shape like the whole of the universe, and then distributed them around the heaven (40a). These stars and planets embody

harmony in their motions and proportions to their speeds; their movements are law-like and ordered, hence in gazing upon the heavens, one can truly see a manifestation of the Good. Thus, the Good is the general, overarching telos for the creation of the universe, it is the first and most important cause.[10]

After the formation of the stars and planets, there remained three kinds of "primary matter" to be given intelligent motion. It was necessary that creatures of the air, land and sea be created, for:

> If these be not born, the Heaven will be imperfect; for it will not contain all the kinds of living being, as it must if it is to be perfect and complete (41bc).

To create this diversity, the Demiurge decided that he would do so through the creation of man. He recognized, however, that if he made men without any help from others, they would have to be made according to the standards of the best, and in that case, they would be gods. If there were only immortals and nothing else, the world would not be complete. So, he charged the lesser gods with the task of fashioning the mortal parts of the soul while the Demiurge made the immortal part, so that they, "...should share the name of the immortals, being called divine and ruling over those among them who at any time are willing to follow after righteousness..." (41c). Thus, the Demiurge created the *nous* of every man and the lesser gods made the other two parts of the soul. Notice here that though the *best*

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[10] To call the Good a *final cause* would be an anachronism, and though it appears that it would be apt to apply the term, I have resisted the temptation for (1) Plato did not use that particular terminology and (2) Aristotelian causality is based on an entirely different schema. For a discussion of Reason as a cause bridging between Aristotle's final and efficient causes, see Steven K. Strange (1985).

is still the overarching cause, "completeness" or "fullness" is a factor in bringing about the best. The best does not imply *only* the highest forms of existence, but necessarily includes lesser beings. For the world to be complete, there had to be a diversity of creatures; a good painting must have shading as well as light.

To create man, the Demiurge used the same material which he used to create the universe, though it was less pure (41d). He divided this soul into as many parts as there are stars, mounted them there "as it were in chariots" and declared to them the laws of Destiny (41e). Each would be incarnated as a man, so "...that none might suffer disadvantage at his hands," and if he should live well by mastering sensation and desire (42b), he would live in righteousness and return to his consort star. The creation of the other creatures of the land, sea and air, depended upon how well those first men succeeded in living morally. If a man failed, he would be reborn as a woman, and if she failed she would be incarnated in "...some beast of a nature resembling the formation of that character...". Thus the earth is said to be filled with many different living things due to the moral behaviour of its inhabitants. Each person is urged to control their soul's response to sensations and desires, and "...by discourse of reason and return once more to the form of his first and best condition" (42d).

These passages about the return to the consort star and the transmigration into beasts are a major point of division between literalist and non-literalist interpreters. Though I am trying to defend a literal interpretation of the whole of the dialogue, I would agree with the non-literalist position in this case; the main intent of these passages is to teach a moral lesson and I believe that they ought to be taken as fables. These excerpts are not intended to show that the

transmigration of souls into the bodies of beasts actually occurs nor are they intended to show that there is a final release to a consort star. The main lesson that these fables support is the notion that the soul has something divine in it, and that part must be the controlling aspect. If the sensations or desires were to rule, then order would not prevail; the worse, the unintelligent would control the better, the intelligent. The import of the burden of proof compels me to provide a reason for holding the position I do, however. While the eschatological myths warned not to take the science of the accounts seriously and encouraged the listeners to use them for strength, there is no such explicit proviso here. But there are two *reductios*, however, which act as implicit provisos and allows us to regard these passages about the transmigration of souls and a permanent return to a consort as fables. While I do not mean to suggest that Plato intended for us to employ these *reductios*, pursuing them does show that the literal position is not necessarily well thought out and it is therefore doubtful that these passages were seriously intended.

First, the literal interpretation of the argument about the transmigration of souls leads to an absurdity and therefore clears the way for an allegorical interpretation. The basic outline is as follows: if the world is for the best, then there must be a diversity of creatures (41bc). If there is to be a diversity of creatures, then some men must live unrighteously.[11] Therefore, if the world is to

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[11] Since Timaeus makes no mention of creatures being formed other than by reincarnation from the morally corrupt, and I am trying to follow the argument precisely, then I will assume that the *only* way for creatures to be created is through transmigration. Admittedly, though it is possible that the gods directly make the lesser creatures, there is no explicit mention of it.

be the best, then some men *must* live unrighteously. We are faced with two contradictory choices, however:

A. All men ought to control their sensations and desires (42ab, 86b-87b, 89d-90d etc.)

Or

B. Some men ought not control their sensations and desires
Assuming: (i) the world is for the best
(ii) the best world includes diversity
(iii) diversity is *only* attained through transmigration

Therefore, we are left with the choice between upholding a universal imperative encouraging morality, or an unproved theory about populating the world which entails immoral behaviour. Since (A) is not only argued for throughout the *Timaeus* but it is also an axiom in several other of Plato's works, it is extremely doubtful that it is the one which should be given up. So if (B) is to fall, it must be on account of any of the three propositions that make it possible. The notion (i) that the world is for the best is an axiom of the *Timaeus* and the whole reason for the world's creation hence it is unlikely that Plato wishes us to abandon this assumption. Thus, we are left with (ii) or (iii), and since plenitude (ii) was proclaimed by the Demiurge as a direct implication of a world created for the best (41bc), we are left with doubting (iii). Since much of Plato's work is devoted to promoting moral behaviour in his listeners, I therefore conclude that he would hold (A) seriously while treating (B)(iii) as an amusing fable. What the passage about populating the earth does say is that men must control their desires and appetites and they cannot escape responsibility for their actions, but it is extremely doubtful that the punishment for immoral behaviour would be transmigration.

Second, the argument about a permanent return to a consort star has similar inconsistent conclusions which cause the reader to reconsider whether it is meant literally. The outline is much the same as above; if the world is for the best, then there is diversity. But *if every one* of the first men controlled his sensations and desires (unlikely, but possible), then all of them would be rewarded, "...journey back to the habitation of his consort star and there live a happy and congenial life" (42b) thus leaving the earth barren. Therefore, the same absurd conclusion as above is reached; if the world is to be for the best, then some men ought not be virtuous and therefore remain to populate the earth. Since there is no mention of reincarnation once one has returned to one's consort star[12], and the number of souls remains fixed (41e), then if the earth became barren due to all men acting virtuously, it would remain so forever. Therefore, Plato must hold only one of the two following statements:

(1) All men ought to act virtuously but a permanent return to one's consort star is impossible

Or

(2) Some men ought not act virtuously, but a permanent return to one's consort star is possible.

Not only does (1) enjoy the benefit of allowing the possibility of the existence of a perfect moral world, it encourages its fulfilment. On the other side of the debate,

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[12] Someone may perhaps argue that life with the consort star is only temporary, but keeping only to what is explicitly written, there is no explicit mention of ever having to leave the happy, congenial life. As I will demonstrate below, however, it may be inferred.

(2) argues that a perfect moral world is not even *desirable* for the conditions of plenitude would be violated. The counterintuitive implications that (2) entails leads me to conclude that it is simply forwarded as an entertaining moral fable to encourage people to act morally rather than a seriously meant philosophical doctrine.

The next logical step is to argue that the possibility of a *temporary* life with one's consort star is not ruled out. Moreover, since there is a fixed number of souls (41d) and the species consisting of human souls in human bodies must continue (41bc)[13], then reincarnation of some kind is necessary for the best world. This argument would be similar to the first and third arguments for the immortality of the soul offered in the *Phaedo*, namely, the argument from opposites and the kinship of souls and forms. For the world to continue, argues the *Phaedo*, there must be some sort of "Heraclitean" cycle where the soul travels from incarnate to discarnate and back again. Hence, reincarnation of some kind is held in common between these two works. Furthermore, it should be noted that the kind of soul which is said to be immortal in the *Phaedo* is very similar to the divine part of the soul (the *nous*) in the *Timaeus*; it is the part which reasons and grasps the forms but which is extremely impersonal in the conventional sense. In the *Timaeus*, only the *nous* deserves to be called "immortal or "divine" (41cd, 69cd, 90a), while the body and irrational soul are made by the lesser gods and called mortal (41d). In other words, the *Timaeus* explicitly substantiates what the *Phaedo* left implicit; immortality is for the rational part of the soul and any description like that

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[13] J.V. Robinson (1990) p. 107

contained in the eschatological myths is far more personal than can be expected in the Platonic portrait.

The moral absurdities that are entailed by populating the earth through the transmigration of souls substantiates not taking those passages in the *Republic* and *Phaedo* literally[14]. Thus, we have a definitive response to Julia Annas' contention that we have no reason to believe that Plato thought reincarnation into animals is impossible[15]. In short, to compel men to act unrighteously is simply not a Platonic doctrine so the transmigration of souls is not necessary for populating the earth. Some may wish to argue that Plato did not put forward such a universal theory of ethics, and in the case of the formation of the world, perhaps the individual's interests should bow to the demands of the best. As I will demonstrate below, however, this is clearly not the intent of the *Timaeus*. My interpretation of the *Timaeus* does suffer from at least one failing, however, for how creatures were created remains a mystery. Since speculation on the issue would remain purely conjectural, I will resist the temptation. Suffice it to say that the lesson offered in the passages about the transmigration of souls and the return to a consort star are more concerned with moral rather than cosmological details and as such, have little to say on somewhat irrelevant issues. When looking for the primary or most important causes, details about the physical world are clearly

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[14] My contention that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the *Timaeus* is closely related to that offered in the *Republic* and *Phaedo* supports the idea that the *Timaeus* is in fact a middle dialogue, written around the same time as the other two and some time before the *Phaedrus*. See G.E.L. Owen (1965)

[15] Annas (1982), p. 127

secondary in Plato's mind.

Having argued that the consequences of a literal interpretation of the passages about the transmigration of souls and a permanent return to a consort star lead one to question the closeness with which they were held, I must immediately add that the *Timaeus* is far from mute on the question of immortality in general. The *Timaeus* offers two ways in which immortality may be had: (1) by linking yourself to divine things and thinking divine thoughts you can become immortal (cf. 90bc) and (2) procreation is allayed with the divine part of the body and hence it is at least hinted to be involved with immortality. Of the first, there are some passages which hint that Plato likens immortality to something like, "living fully in the present." While it is not thoroughly developed in the *Timaeus*, it does echo the notion of the "Averroan" kind of immortality suggested in the *Phaedo's* argument from recollection. The emphasis is on a kind of immortality one enjoys when one is thinking while incarnated. For example:

> But if his heart has been set on the love of learning and true wisdom and he has exercised that part of himself above all, he is surely bound to have thoughts immortal and divine, if he shall lay hold upon truth, nor can he fail to possess immortality in the fullest measure that human nature admits; and because he is always devoutly cherishing the divine part and maintaining the guardian genius that dwells with him in good estate, he must needs be happy above all (90bc).

Note that this passage speaks only about the immortality that "human nature admits" and urges that thinking divine thoughts will make one "happy above all." There is no suggestion that Timaeus is speaking about a different kind of immortal life that comes about after death - there is always a divine part of a human soul, and a human enjoys immortality anytime she thinks. The immortality to which he

is referring seems to be an immanent one; readers are not urged to wait for an ethereal immortal life to come, but to realize it now through a devotion to the highest things.

Second, the notion of immortality through procreation is hinted at in the passages about the marrow of the body. The marrow is made up of the smooth triangles that went into making fire, water, air and earth; the Demiurge moulded it into a spherical shape to house the divine part of the soul and called it the "brain," while he stretched the remainder through the body inside the bones (73cd). The marrow runs from the brain, down the vertebrae and excess juices exit via the outlet of the sexual organs (90a). Thus, the locale of what he has deemed the "divine seed" is physically linked to the Eros of begetting, the reproduction seed (91b). As Cornford observes;

> Regarded in this light as the passion for immortality in all its forms, Eros could not be treated as merely an element in the appetitive part. Its physical medium, the seed, does not belong to the sexual organs, which merely provide an outlet and a receptacle. As actually part of the marrow, it is continuous with the brain, the seat of the immortal and divine part.[16]

Not only can one be immortal in this life through thought, but the organ of that kind of immortality is closely related to the organ of the somewhat vicarious physical immortality. Notions of otherwordly activities and control are quickly slipping from the *Timaeus* account to the "natural" and earthly events. Remnants of the literal interpretation of the eschatological myths disappear as the import of

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[16] Cornford (1937), pp. 292-293

the words of a real philosopher become known. This myth is aimed squarely at the philosophical man, urging him to realize the immortality and happiness which it seems that he is capable of right now. As we will presently see, the whole of the cosmos was directed toward the development of philosophy and any person who engages in that thought process is destined to lead a happy and immortal life.

There remains one final objection to the theory that the transmigration of souls and return to a consort star are not literally intended, that is, perhaps Plato was willing to admit that some men ought to be unrighteous. My response would be, briefly stated, there is no evidence for this position in the *Timaeus*. In fact, the whole of the cosmos is directed, to some extent, to the development of philosophy among the earth's inhabitants, and guiding one's life by philosophy is the end for us all. I cite as support for this thesis the passage which follows on the heels of the recommendation to search for the highest causes: after having recommended looking for a telos, Timaeus immediately observes the effect that is obtained when one gazes upon the perfect world;

> But as it is, the sight of day and night, of months and revolving years, of equinox and solstice, has caused the invention of number and bestowed on us the notion of time and the study of the nature of the world; whence we have derived all philosophy, than which no greater boon has ever come or shall come to mortal man as a gift from heaven (47ab).

Thus, in addition to the Demiurge creating the world because he wanted the best world possible, part of the scheme included the birth of philosophy among mortal men. Part of the reason for making the supralunary world revolve so perfectly, part of the whole reason for the cosmos was for the evolution of philosophy. The Demiurge gave men eyes so that they could learn to compute intelligently, to see

true ordered motion and to, "...reduce to settled order the wandering motions in ourselves" (47c). If a human chooses not to pursue philosophy, therefore, the whole weight of the created order would seem to work against him. The Demiurge has given all the necessary conditions for man to develop philosophy, and it is up to him to carry it through to the end. The destiny of the world was directed to the eventual birth of philosophy after a study of natural science, and any deviation from that destiny is not only against god's plan, but the whole tendency of the world.

This passage also offers a response to the people's respect for poets; rather than imitating and guiding one's life by tragedies and epic poems, look to the heavens for guidance. Since education, on Plato's account, is based mostly on habit and imitation, then if one can harness and understand the regularity and control of the cosmos, then it will be reflected in one's soul. Thus Plato delves beyond the "approved" poetry as offered in his previous myths for he urges that one can study natural science and become morally trained. In fact, this excerpt about the value of natural science in moral life is a further argument to take the *Timaeus* as a seriously meant scientific account. It is not just a poetical flourish, but a real scientific study to seek out the regularity and harmony in the cosmos so that one can imitate that regularity and harmony in one's soul.

This inscription of order in the universe for the purposes of developing philosophy has obvious moral implications. In the discussion about the diseases of the soul (86b-87b) which was directly referred to in the creation account of the soul (44c), these moral lessons about the laws of destiny come clear. At first, Timaeus seems to argue that immorality is not the person's fault;

> No one is willingly bad; the bad man becomes so because of some faulty habit of body and unenlightened upbringing; and these are unwelcome afflictions that come to any man against his will (86de).

And again;

> Besides all this, when men of so bad a composition dwell in cities with evil forms of government, where no less evil discourse is held both in public and private, and where, moreover, no course of study that might counteract this poison is pursued from youth upward, that is how all of us who are bad become so, through two causes that are altogether against the will (87ab).

Both of these statements talk of the effects of being born to a situation which is not conducive to philosophical development and both speak of an immorality that is against the will. If Plato had stopped at this point, then perhaps we would be entitled to argue that some people are fated to be evil from being born to a situation over which they had no control. Plato seems to be dangling a carrot in front of the immoral horse, apparently offering him an excuse. Then comes the whip, however, for "...nevertheless, a man must use his utmost to endeavour by means of education, pursuits and study to escape from badness and lay hold upon its contrary" (87b). Education can win out over any unhealthy situation, and it should be noted that the second quote above does allow that if one is educated from youth on, then corruption would disappear. This is not to say, however, that everyone can become philosophical. Some are naturally less inclined, but those people must strive to be as good as they can given their proper circumstance. One must endeavour to make the best of your own situation, to exercise one's body and mind in perfect proportion (87b-89d) and to succeed in making the better part of the soul control the worse. Hence this passage supports the notion that Plato is

arguing that *all* men be virtuous and make reason control the soul; since not even those who are born to poor situations can be excused for immoral behaviour, then why would he urge some men to do so in their first and divinely fair incarnation? Plato's is a universal ethic, admitting that some simply cannot be as good or intelligent as others naturally, and even those who are unwillingly bad are urged to be educated. No one is fated to be evil, they simply choose not fulfil what is wholly expected of them.

To sum up; the *Timaeus* account is not much different than that offered in the eschatological myths, only there is more science surrounding what is essentially a moral lesson. The *Timaeus* does allow for some kind of reincarnation, but nothing like the literal interpretation of the eschatological myths. It also maintains that people are responsible for their actions, but the precise punishment for not adhering to the dictates of reason are uncertain, and the rewards may simply be happiness in this life (cf. 42b, 90c). Perhaps the greatest lesson that is offered is that immortality is not something that can only be expected in some distant future, but is available to those who seek and become educated now. The whole cosmos was created with the regularity and order that it has so that man may gaze upon the stars, develop natural science and evolve to philosophy. Quite literally, one's fate is sealed in the stars; for one's fate is to have philosophy and reason order one's soul, and without the regular motion of the stars, that education would be impossible (47a). The stars do not dictate our actions, however, for it is we who must turn towards them.

I will conclude this chapter of my paper with the following note; Plato's whole attitude toward personal responsibility has a foil in his conception of motion.

Throughout the *Timaeus*, Plato argues along the following lines;

> Of motions, the best is that which is produced in oneself by oneself, since it is most akin to the movement of thought and of the universe; motion produced by another is inferior; and worst of all is that whereby, while the body lies inert, its several parts are moved by foreign agents (89a).

Whether it be physical strength or moral virtue, the best root of the action ought to stem from the self. This is true both of the personal soul and of the world soul, for self sufficiency is a mark of absolute excellence. The Demiurge made the world spherical and all-encompassing, but with no eyes for there was nothing outside it to see, and no ears, for there was nothing outside it to hear (33bc).

> [I]t was designed to feed itself on its own waste and to act and be acted upon entirely by itself and within itself; because its framer thought that it would be better self-sufficient, rather than dependent on anything else (33cd).

The head of each person was also made spherical and it is the most self-sufficient part of the body. It may have eyes and ears to grasp what is outside, but its thoughts are to be directed only to objects that are proper to it. Since the human soul was made from both the same bowl and the same material as the world soul, it must follow the same sort of dictates. The human soul is told not to allow that which is from without, desires or sensations, to change its course from divine thoughts. Moreover, since perfection is self-sufficiency in the physical make-up of the universe, it should come as no surprise that self-sufficiency is the goal for moral life. If the divine part of our soul is in control, then we are not subject to the mercy of a sometimes erratic environment. Plato has tried to limit the

influence of chance as much as possible[17], and with this accent on self-sufficiency comes the opportunity to be both happy and immortal in this life.

[17] Martha Nussbaum (1986), pp. 85-203

VII. Conclusions

There are two levels on which conclusions must be drawn: the first concerns the function of myth in Plato's philosophy and the second involves what position those myths defend. These myths are a testament to Plato's faith in the philosophical process; the stories are not meant only to amuse or pacify, but to introduce, teach and enable the listeners to embark on a more philosophical course.

Of the four myths discussed in this thesis, there are at least three distinct functions: (1) to introduce the listeners to looking at their situations *sub specie aeternitatis*, (2) to use as a charm to strengthen one's faith in philosophy and (3) as a way of introducing scientific speculation as a viable alternative to mere stories in the moral and technical education of the day. The *Gorgias* myth is concerned primarily with (1), for it is directed to an audience that is entirely unphilosophical and shows no signs of changing from that stance. It is an attempt to get someone who thinks only of the temporal to begin to consider his choices from an eternal view, it is a tool to bridge the two very different ways of looking at the world. The *Phaedo* myth is more concerned with (2), for it is told to a crowd of philosophical youths who want to believe in the power of philosophy but they see that in Socrates' case, philosophy sometimes leads to unpleasant circumstances. To combat this growing sense of misology, Socrates tells a myth that promotes the idea that one must guide one's life by philosophy at all times, even in death. The story is to be used as a charm, a mantra to keep one's faith in the findings of philosophy. The Myth of Er seems to combine both (1) and (2), for Socrates regards Glaucon as three removes from the Virtuous Life and in need of instruction, but he also says at the myth's conclusion that in believing in it, one

can be saved (621c). It urges the general lesson that the only way to guarantee that a good choice is made is not by looking to the consequences, but by concentrating on the process of judgment. He shows the counter-intuitive findings that rewards can in fact be harmful and pain can be beneficial, so the only trustworthy way to lead one's life is to disregard those factors and look to a "philosophical guide." These three myths attempt to do what philosophy cannot; that is, they step outside the rigours of dialectic and tell stories to encourage faith and introduce people to philosophy. They are stories which attempt to grant philosophy legitimacy as a reliable method of arriving at knowledge. Finally, the *Timaeus* represents a break from the traditional myths and is grounded in "science," but the end that Plato has in mind is much the same. He uses this scientific myth to show that because Reason orders the cosmos, man was able to develop philosophy. The study of natural science leads to the recognition that the cosmos is ordered and from that, one can begin to order one's soul. The *Timaeus* myth as a whole is quite different from the previous three for it mainly speculates about much the same things as philosophy but with less accuracy. The results of its speculation are 'likely' rather than the certain knowledge sometimes achieved through dialectic. The *Timaeus* myth is one of Plato's responses to Poetry for it attempts to accomplish through science and philosophy what had previously been done in myth; it represents an attempt to replace the poets with science for the moral education. Since it is set in a philosophical crowd, it is a serious attempt to inscribe his vision of morality in the whole course of the cosmos. Yet, the key lesson of philosophy being one's guide remains mainly unchanged from the previous myths.

I have tried to show that the moral import of his myths were of primary concern to Plato. Yet, there is some evidence of a metaphysical position in them. Most importantly, Plato does ascribe to a doctrine of reincarnation for this is hinted at in the first and third arguments in the *Phaedo*, while being central to the myths of the *Phaedo*, Er and *Timaeus*. The immortality that is defended in the *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* is entirely unindividual, however. The *nous* is the only part of the soul that is immortal: moreover, this kind of immortality can be enjoyed in the present, incarnate form. There is no indication that the other two parts of the soul will survive separation from the body and with them will go such things as appetite and memory of individual events. With this stark picture of the soul as the principle of motion or at best, a life-force, there is little indication that it is able to make the choices that are described in the eschatological myths. Plato surely would have known that he needs more argument than he has given to truly defend the notion of the soul choosing from among lives after death. Perhaps the most convincing argument to view the immortal soul as impersonal is that in both the *Phaedo* and Er, he argues that the details are not to be insisted upon (Phaedo 114d, Rep. 621b) yet they present the soul quite anthropomorphically, while the *Timaeus* is presented in all seriousness but argues that only the *nous* is immortal. Thus, I am led to conclude that the discarnate soul plays little or no role in determining whether the incarnate life will be a good one. The eschatological myths are primarily stories or charms which attempt to help the audience to see that if one breaks from viewing the world by the distracting eyes of the embodied, then one will be able to make true and virtuous selections. The passages about the transmigration of souls falls to a similar fate for they are presented in a humorous

way and the logical conclusions that were teased out in the *Timaeus* seem to argue against its possibility.

It is undeniable that Plato's myths have strong moral lessons behind them. Walter Kaufmann seizes on this and accuses Plato of using his myths to pacify and direct the masses, "For Plato recognized the dangers of poetry - but only in others"[1]. Others are even more hostile to Plato's use of myth:

> Because of the nature of myth-making and its subject matter, myth could not be used as a means of approaching, attaining or relaying knowledge of truth, but Plato, while recognizing its limitations and angers, was ready to adopt it in a variety of circumstances as an instrument of moral education. Its entertainment value and peculiar attraction could be harnessed to advantage in moulding the minds of the young, and in persuading and encouraging the adult to adopt an appropriate way of life. A loss of dignity and freedom is the price to be paid.[2]

While Plato does adopt a paternalist approach to education and firmly believes that the intellectually inferior need education, I have attempted to show that his myths strive to surmount the ignorance of his audience. While Kaufmann and Wright seem to think that Plato wants to lead his audience like sheep, the myths in fact challenge the listeners to begin to see the world by philosophy. Thus, Plato not only critiques the poets of the day, but he provides real alternatives. He tells the kind myths that he would approve of, while he goes beyond myth to consult the science of his day. His myths attempt to bring his listeners into the philosophical fold, rather than dictating what must be done. To the philosophical, he sets his beliefs about morality in a cosmic scheme and urges the study of science to help

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[1] Kaufmann (1959), p. 244

[2] R. Wright (1979), p. 371

attain moral virtue. To the non-philosophical, he attempts to speak in their own language: he uses fiction only to encourage their going beyond it. In either case, Plato provides an alternative to the weeping and lamenting of the myths of old for his are filled with lessons about self-sufficiency, self-motion and strength.

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